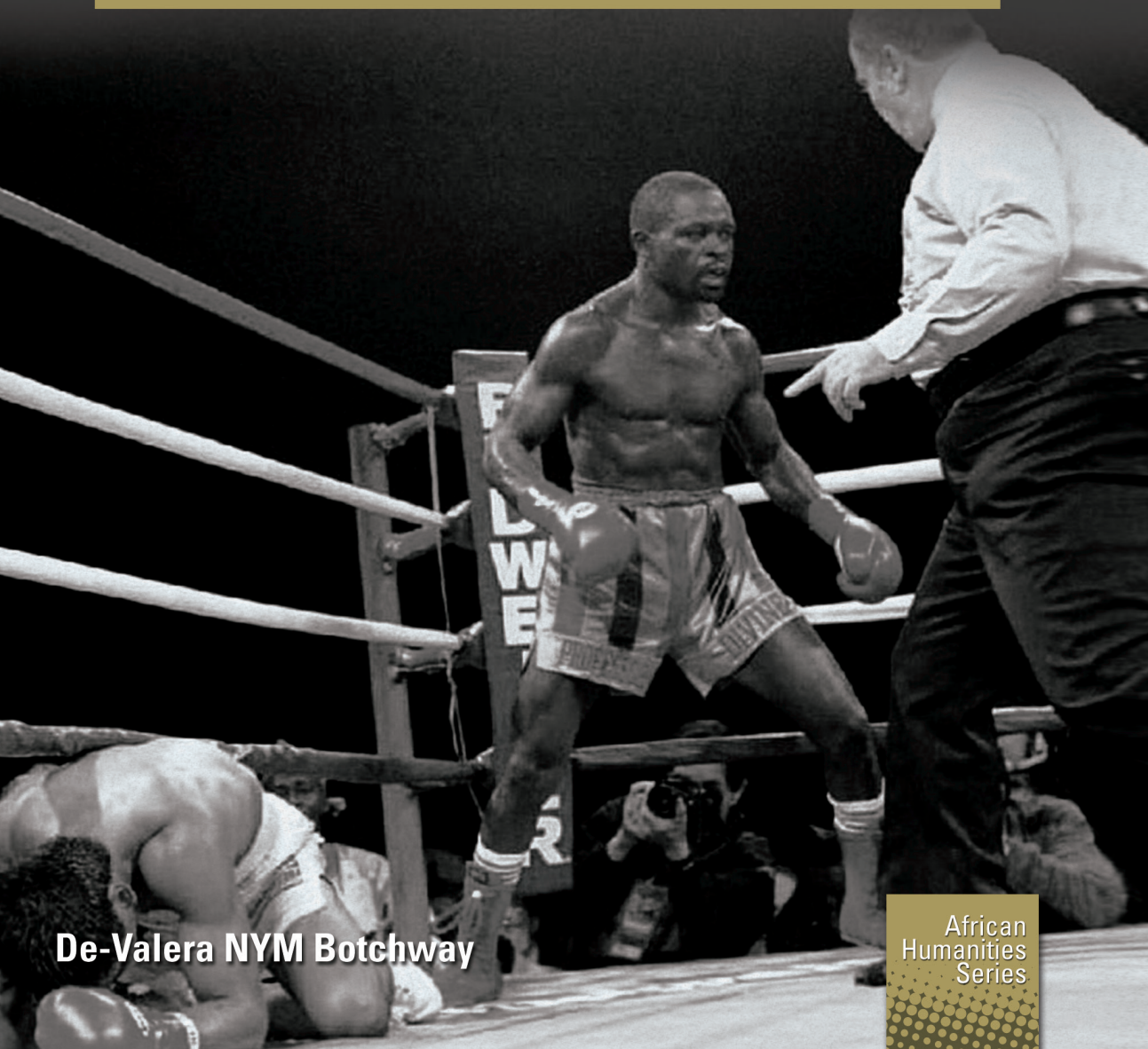


BOXING IS NO CAKEWALK!

Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the Social History of Ghanaian Boxing



De-Valera NYM Botchway

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DE-VALERA NYM BOTCHWAY



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Foreword

I can entertain the proposition that life is a metaphor for boxing—for one of those bouts that go on and on, round following round, jabs, missed punches, clinches, nothing determined, again the bell and again and you and your opponent so evenly matched it's impossible to see your opponent is you ... (Oates, 1994, 4)

Oates could easily be thinking about Azumah 'Champ' Nelson in penning these words. Azumah, who went from the streets of Accra to champion the boxing world, was constantly fighting himself; how to take on the world but stay rooted in an environment that still carried the hangovers of Du Bois' 'colour line' and colonial conquest. De-Valera Botchway brilliantly illuminates the life of Azumah as one of the great Ghanaian boxers of all time. Moving with Ali-esque ease, De-Valera Botchway stitches and stretches life inside and beyond the confines of the ring, foregrounding Azumah's own agency and urgency.

In many ways, Azumah's life epitomises Eric Hobsbawm's view of sport as

... a continuous means of asserting oneself as a human being, as an agent in the world and not the subject of others' actions, as a discipline of the soul, a daily testing, an expression of the value and sense of life, a way to perfection. (Hobsbawm, 2011, 280)

In the pages of this book, De-Valera Botchway refuses a sanitised version of the life and times of Azumah and shows an incredible sensitivity to what Azumah came to mean beyond the confines of the boxing world.

From extremely humble beginnings in the bustling city of Accra during the 1950s, Azumah Nelson was like many other children struggling to survive, hustling, hawking and finding any which way to play truant from school. His father earned a living as a tailor and mother selling fish, but with five children, his parents were unable to pay for Champ's education and therefore, from a very young age, he was already looking to boxing as a pursuit to take him away from the poverty and deprivation of urban life. Boxing for prize money was a way out, and street life gave him the perfect opportunity to practise amateur boxing until the age of 16, by which time he had totally given up on school. Azumah Nelson's difficult childhood and local environment are related in detail in the book, along with his rise to stardom and entry into an enticing and exciting universe of local and international media and lifestyle. Significantly, the book also focuses on the challenges inherent in this sudden

fame and its effect on the man as a private and family person, national icon, sports legend, and social activist.

During the 1980s and early 90s, Azumah Nelson became world featherweight champion and world super featherweight champion twice and held onto the titles for many years. In the process, he became arguably the greatest boxer to come out of Africa and a heavyweight luminary in the pantheons of national heroes in Ghana.

But let's be honest. The story of Azumah Nelson became lost in a continent obsessed with soccer. Ghana has produced soccer players that have risen to the world stage and become global household names. Those who pioneered a lonelier path to global conquest hardly make the footnote of African sports history. De-Valera Botchway's work changes that. He digs up Azumah's life from the footnotes of history. But this is not a book about one man alone. It skilfully and passionately narrates the social history of a particular community in relation to Azumah Nelson and Ghanaian boxing as a whole. This is a biography and social history of boxing in and of colonial and postcolonial Ghanaian boxing and sports. However, it exemplifies sports as far more than simply entertainment; it shows the meaningful and positive impacts that sports can have on human society and social values.

Having interrogated the core social, economic, ideological and cultural significance of boxing in Ghana, this book adds to the history of popular culture, especially sports, and enriches its historiography. Relatively unknown outside Ghana, De-Valera Botchway's ground-breaking study finally moves this brilliant featherweight from the margins of history to centre stage.

The power of sport, as Mike Marqusee argues, is that,

...it is possible to challenge and overturn the dominant hierarchies of nation, race and class. The reversal may be limited and transient, but it is nonetheless real. It is, therefore, wrong to see black sporting achievement merely as an index of oppression; it is equally an index of creativity and resistance, collective and individual'. (Marqusee, 1995, 5)

It is these very qualities 'of creativity and resistance' as Azumah Nelson paraded the global stage while remaining rooted locally that De-Valera Botchway brings to life with a captivating narrative full of jabs, upper-cuts and counter-punches.

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Preface

The historiography of Ghana in the post-colony moment has traditionally privileged political and economic history. The resuscitated Historical Society of Ghana in 2001 deemed this bias unproductive to the historiographical tradition of Ghana and Africa as a whole. The challenge to this unhelpful slant demands a momentous promotion of other dimensions of the study and writing of history, such as social and cultural history and biography, for a wider understanding of the history of Ghana. Ghana is a sports-loving nation and disciplines like football (soccer) and boxing have a long history in the society and popular culture of the country. Is it not possible for the study of aspects of the sports order to give us some interesting insights into facets of Ghanaian history?

Globally, sports and amateur and professional sportspersons are important forces in social and cultural spaces. Sportspersons, especially professional ones, often become public figures that animate the popular culture of their societies and attain the status of historical figures. In Ghana, boxing is an immensely popular sport, but it also has an interesting history that serves as a significant piece in Ghana's collage of history. The boxing tradition in Ghana, which takes its historical genesis from foreign (English) and local sporting inventiveness, has produced famous occupational boxers who have obtained international sports laurels that have glorified their nation and contributed in diverse ways to the popular culture and socioeconomic development of the country. The most celebrated of these is undoubtedly Azumah Nelson. He comes from the Ga-Mashie Ga-Mashie (also spelt as Ga-Mashi or Ga Mashi) ethnic group of Accra, the first group to take up organised English-style boxing when it was formally introduced to the colonial territory in 1930s. He won both the WBC featherweight and super-featherweight titles in the 1980s. He remained a dominant figure in the featherweights until his retirement 1998. Who is this boxer whose sense of discipline, humility, sporting excellence in boxing, and repute as a self-made millionaire businessman, employer, philanthropist and social activist made him a national hero and an international boxing legend? Who is this 'fighter' whose luminary impact on the local and international community rewarded him with one of Ghana's highest awards – the Order of the Volta – and made him the first living continental African in the International Boxing Hall of Fame? What can the story of his life and career tell us about Ghana's history? How can it help us to rationalise boxing not as 'a craft of bruising' or 'the sweet science of self-defence' but an enterprise and profession that has helped to shape Ghana's popular culture and history?



Realising Azumah Nelson's dominant position in the tradition of boxing and popular culture in Ghana, and how boxing gave him tremendous social, economic and political leverage, this book offers a biographical perspective on Azumah Nelson and serves as a valuable lens for appreciating the social history of boxing in Ghana. It offers some understanding of how boxing as an item of sports has offered invaluable facilities to the creation and shaping of individual, group and national identities and contributed to the quest for nation-building and the promotion of Ghana's national development agenda. Thus, this book reveals how Ga-Mashie and Azumah Nelson harnessed boxing for cultural and economic empowerment. The social history of boxing in Ghana that it conveys allows us to rationalise that there is more to boxing than attacks and defences and bodily pains and bruises.

Glossary of acronyms and abbreviations

ABU	African Boxing Union	IBC	International Boxing Council
ARPS	Aborigines Right Protection Society	IBF	International Boxing Federation
BCE	Before Common Era	KBE	Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire
CE	Common Era	KO	Knockout
COS	Central Organisation of Sports	L	Loss
CSAC	California State Athletic Commission	LPRR	London Prize Ring Rules
CYO	Catholic Youth Organisation	NCBWA	National Congress of British West Africa
CPP	Convention People's Party	PTS	Points
DABA	District Amateur Boxing Associations	PDG	People's Daily Graphic
DN	Daily News	PRAAD	Public Records and Archives Administration Department
DG	Daily Graphic	PNDC	Provisional National Defence Council
DP	Dementia pugilistica	RABA	Regional Amateur Boxing Associations
GABA	Ghana Amateur Boxing Association	SD	Split Decision
GBBC	Ghana Boxing Board of Control	TKO	Technical Knockout
GCASC	Gold Coast Amateur Sports Council	USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
GCABA	Gold Coast Amateur Boxing Association	WBA	World Boxing Association
GS	Graphic Sports	WBC	World Boxing Council
GT	Ghanaian Times	WBF	World Boxing Federation
GV	Ghanaian Voice	WBO	World Boxing Organisation
GCBBC	Gold Coast Boxing Board of Control	WMA	World Medical Association
HIV	Human immunodeficiency virus		
HSG	Historical Society of Ghana		
IBA	International Boxing Authority		



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- Figure 9** Azumah Nelson sitting confidently at the palace of the Bolga Naba in Ghana. Photo, Jomo Yeboah Adjei. ©Ministry of Information, Ghana.
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- Figure 11** The author, De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway (left), and Azumah Nelson in Accra, Ghana, in 2011. ©De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway, Ghana.

Sports and modern¹ boxing

The nature and function of play,² games³ and sport(s)⁴ in all eras and for different localities and people are interesting areas to examine. The culture of sports in social life constitutes

... distinctive value-orientations and interest and important social concerns
... accompanied by distinctive modes of social interaction [and] emphasises
'important' social phenomena; [and] relationships of 'strategic' 'structural
significance'. (Gould and Kolb 1964, 338)

The institution of sports, which is an indispensable part of human social life, may be seen to encapsulate play(ful) actions and games, but it has tremendous powers which, harnessed and used, could positively or negatively shape society. Sports therefore surpass mere play, games and entertainment. The enormous political, cultural, economic and social power with which sports are endowed can influence people's lives in numerous ways. Sports, including boxing, are social constructs that have dynamic interrelations with political systems, ideology, social class, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality (Coakley and Lever 2000, 2985).

This book, which explores the social history of boxing in Ghana and its nexus with the biography of Azumah Nelson, Ghana's most celebrated boxer, therefore opines that the multifaceted power of sports, especially boxing, influences people's lives in diverse ways. The book consequently interrogates the social meaning of boxing and its impact within the colonial and postcolonial milieux of popular culture in Ghana. Thus, it reconsiders the prevailing conception of boxing as adversative to 'enlightened' human culture by rationalising it as a positive creator of individual and national identities. The historicising of sports and the lives of sportspersons in Ghana provide a good panorama and understanding of the dynamics of society in the past and their effects in the present. The book's analytical narrative offers an intellectual contribution to the burgeoning areas of social and cultural history in Ghana's historiography and the scholarly discourse on identity formation and social empowerment through the popular culture of sports.

Sports as elicitors of ambivalence

There are competing perceptions and views about the relevance, implications, natures and functions of sports in society. These perceptions are informed by what sports have, across time, been used for by groups and individuals within specific sociocultural spaces and, generally, on the global politico-economic and cultural scene. However, there are some commonalities and a confluence of opinions. The opinions possess the trope that sports affect the lives of people in different ways. For example, Frederick Douglass, the former slave and famous abolitionist from the American South, believed that slaveholders used sports to decoy the minds and deaden the energies of the enslaved. Sports, especially those pursued on public holidays, therefore enhanced oppression, and prevented the enslaved from pursuing more 'useful activities' and contemplating revolt against their enslavers.

Within the notion of hegemony, sports served an important function for the slaveholders. From their perspective, therefore, sports were desirable since they had the power and functionality for achieving desired result(s). Douglass, in that context, believed that sports and merriment, sanctioned by the hegemonic class for the enslaved were, like force and whipping, among the most effective ways of 'breaking the Negro' and 'keeping down the spirit of insurrection' (Douglass 1982, 115). Thus, the employment of sports labelled with the name of 'liberty' was a dose of vicious dissipation used to cheat, since they served as fraudulent conductors or safety valves to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity (Douglass 1982, 115). The abandonment of sports, to Douglass, was a sure way to revive the self and to quicken the spirit of insurrection to freedom and real liberty. Although one might disagree with Douglass's conclusion, while operating from a particular American slavery environment, that the effect of sports gravitated in one direction, he was nonetheless theoretically correct in recognising and pointing out that sports are far more than just games people play.

Considering Douglass's position, it becomes clear how sports could be used as the 'opium of the masses' and as weapons of control by hegemonic classes and majority nationalities against vassals and minorities. This old trick can even be found in the history of classical Imperial and Republican Rome. The politically powerful sponsored sporting spectacles, which were often staged in the circus and arena, and used the euphoria that they yielded to divert the public's attention from crises affecting government structures and politics. Aspiring politicians used them to shape public feeling and endear themselves to the sports-loving masses to achieve political mileage (Le Glay, Voisin, Bohec, Cherry and Kyle 2005, 176). The sponsors, including imperial leaders such as Julius Caesar (Le Glay et al. 2005, 177) and Nero (Holland 2001, 116–118), used them to reinforce the social order and enhance their



political image (Le Glay et al. 2005, 170–171). Nero even took part in some for self-gratification (BBC 2001).

Despite its power to enhance hegemony, sports could and have been used by the suppressed ‘minorities’ and sympathisers to challenge the positions and power of hegemonic groups. For example, sports and politics were conjoined in the global quest to destroy apartheid in South Africa. International sportspersons who dared to compete in South Africa were prohibited from competing anywhere else. South Africa was made a pariah state in the general global sports arena to pressurise that regime to disband. Consequently, prior to the demise of apartheid, a whole generation of South African sportspersons were confined to South Africa and prohibited from competing elsewhere (Freeth 2003).

Beside Douglass, Veblen, in *Theory of the Leisure Class*, cynically perceived sports, whether pursued by the leisure class (bourgeoisie) or working class, as a reversion to ‘barbarian’ culture and ‘marks of an arrested spiritual [and intellectual] development’ (Veblen 1934, 253). According to him, sports in general, and

... manifestations of the predatory temperament are all to be classed under the head of exploit. They are partly simple and unreflected expressions of an attitude of emulative ferocity, partly activities deliberately entered upon with the view to gaining repute for prowess. *Sports of all kinds* are of the general character, including prize-fights (boxing), bull-fights, athletics, shooting, angling, yachting, and [other] games of skills, even where the element of destructive physical efficiency is not an obtrusive feature. Sports shade off from the basis of hostile combat, through skill to cunning and chicanery, without it being possible to draw a line at any point. The ground of an addiction to sports is an archaic spiritual constitution – the possession of the predatory emulative propensity in relatively high potency. A strong proclivity to adventuresome exploit and to the infliction of damage is especially pronounced in those employments, which are in colloquial usage specifically called sportsmanship. (Veblen 1934, 255)

Veblen’s observation is myopic and perfunctory, because the human pursuit of the culture of sports has been largely undertaken for recreational and positively functional purposes. The powers and uses of sports are significant and powerful. A convergence of these characteristics has in many spatial and chronological instances yielded key creative outputs for the building and progression of societies towards harmony and peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, the definition of sports by Irvin Cobb, a twentieth-century humourist, as ‘Hard work for which you do not get paid’ (Paxton 1961, 74), is also pessimistic and imprecise. Transculturally, sports are a fund-churning and economically rewarding industry. Many wealthy people in the twenty-first century are sportspersons or connected to the sports industry as product manufacturers, advisors, physical training experts, coaches, owners of sporting clubs

and promoters. The power of sports as a tool of social mobility, moving people from one social and economic stratum to another, is globally prevalent. Excellence in different sporting disciplines has enabled many people who were of lower socioeconomic standing and deprived background to gain social fame and financial liberation by winning prize monies, advertising sports products, featuring in movies, becoming top sports officials, politicians, coaches, or sports ambassadors for their countries and international sports organisations. Muhammad 'the Louisville Lip' Ali, Pelé, alias Edison Arantes do Nascimento (KBE),⁵ of Brazil, Diego Armando Maradona of Argentina, George Oppong Weah of Liberia and Abedi Pele of Ghana fall within such a category.

In the context of historical and contemporary indigenous ethnic cultures, sports, whether competitive, non-competitive, individual, team, recreational or developmental, have served as important functional and aesthetic elements of society.⁶

Many sports of different pre-modern aboriginal societies, and even modern societies, involved the same skills applicable in war, namely those concerned with hand-to-hand combat like wrestling and boxing, and those concerned with weapons, like archery, handling swords and, later, guns. They sharpened the skills for easy application in actual warfare. Sports have an educational dimension. They form part of the social training of children. They condition their psyche and character and inspire them to emulate certain honourable adult qualities so that they take their place as adults in society. These implications are also true of the cultural history of some ethnic groups in Ghana. According to Vieta (1990, 561), indigenous ethnic groups devised many sporting activities, involving physical exercises and martial arts challenges and confrontations for their young (especially males), to promote courage, fitness and endurance. Among the Ewe, boys around the age of 10 engaged in mock battles, tug-of-war, running and other activities. Children would roll up their clothes in the form of whips in readiness to fight. They would taunt each other with songs of challenge. These arrangements primarily existed to test bravery. The singing tested general knowledge and alertness. The Gurunsi and Sissala were noted for their wrestling contests. The Ga organised inter-community fisticuff contests on special occasions between pairs of children older than five to entertain their communities. Children and the youth were taught to settle disputes or differences with their fists. The combatants fought till the fisticuffs were over with one clearly defeated. They would shake hands and in the spirit of sports camaraderie let go of their anger. All these activities were institutionalised as a means of making the pre-pubescent, pubescent and adolescent males accustomed to combat, lose fear and become adults capable of defending their societies in any event of aggression against or from their enemies (Vieta 1990, 561).

Scrutinising sport and its ever-increasing importance to social progress, Kane and



Murray (1966) concluded that sport should be considered as a social phenomenon worthy of serious academic enquiry. They observed that:

There is no doubt that as sport becomes more and more an important social and economic element of mass culture, there is a growing need to apply the disciplined regimen of social science [and other academic disciplines] in examining the implications of the various forces, [people, i.e. actors and spectators, organisations, ideologies, cultures, politics, international diplomacy, etc.] which have helped to shape its development, structure and organization. (Kane and Murray 1966, 111)

Transculturally and globally, sports provide important social, political and economic issues that should elicit greater research attention from academics. The scholarly exploration of sports, particularly by historians within the corridors of Ghanaian (and African) academia, is burgeoning and worthy of encouragement. The so-called conventional and normative historian, particularly in postcolonial Africa, engaged in political and economic history, may ask questions such as: What does the discipline of history and the historian have to do with sports? Why should the study of the place, relevance and effect of sports in society be of interest and significance to the historian? Why should sports – the institution, organisation, disciplines, and human agency and actors such as sports personalities, promoters and spectators – in society be relevant to the (African) historian? Should the study of customs, traditions, value systems and economic aspects of sports not point to the social and behavioural and physical scientists such the sociologist, psychologist and physical education specialists? No. The phenomenon of sports is broad and possesses dimensions and issues that could be studied and addressed from different scholarly angles, including the arts, sciences and humanities. The dimensions include sports and enrichment of life and understanding of culture, effects of sports on society over time, and sports and the dynamics of continuity and change in society. These dimensions could be studied by the humanities, of which history is primary.

In the study of human nature and affairs, much value can come from the historical study of sports in society, which is part of the quest for meaning, and the value in life. According to Nathan, sports have roots in the humanities through providing life enrichment and fulfilment opportunities. It is an important interest of people throughout the world (Nathan 1958). When the total picture of sports in society is analysed, the field of study must logically be the humanities and by extension the social sciences. Sports, collectively, serve as an element of culture, and culture without history is empty. In addition, there is more to history than the study of monarchs, presidents, prime ministers, or 'great' religions, battles, wars, inventions, and discoveries, and 'great' depressions. The history of sports is one way, among others, to gain a fuller understanding of our collective socio-political and cultural past and

present. Sports are mirrors that reflect aspects of society. They are conditioners or socialising agents that affect society. Therefore, a sport like boxing, including the human agents in it, indubitably provides a legitimate basis for historical enquiry, that is, the critical examination of continuity and change over time and how these, animated by the activities and ideas of individuals, affect the present.

Indeed, the study of sports, in the context of history, offers an exciting avenue for exploring some of the more fundamental realities of the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial Ghana. The historical study of individual sports disciplines, of institutions and politics, and of the life and career of sports personalities in the context of Ghanaian history furthers the unearthing and identification of other researchable areas and sheds light on other interesting issues, such as the place of sport in the cultural hierarchy of Ghana's history. Furthermore, such explorations could examine the role(s) of sports and the effects of its six semi-independent dimensions, namely social experience, health and fitness, pursuit of vertigo, aesthetic experience, catharsis and ascetic experience (Kenyon 1964, 48–54), in the development of the individual and society in the pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial history of Ghana. Additionally, it could interrogate whether sports contribute to the formation and negotiation of social cohesion, general welfare, identity, recognition, control and/or support of the masses, ideology, national security, economics and commerce, and wholesome catharsis. It could facilitate and investigate the nexus between sports and race relations, social/anti-social behaviour and education, social mobility and self-expression for the less-privileged in society, recreation, and national and international understanding and goodwill. These areas should obviously attract the research attention and concerns of historians interested in the social and cultural history of Ghana.

In contrast to any pessimistic view that sports do not possess the same status as art, music and literature,⁷ and the assertion of some writers such as Brill that: 'Primitive man, [whatever that means] likewise was too busy to feel any need of games. It was only when civilisation brought periods of peace and security to certain nations that games [sports] were invented ...' (Brill 1929, 427–434), Cozens and Stumpf (1953, 1) argued that sports and physical recreation activities are an integral part of the 'arts of humanity'.

Such activities have formed a basic part of all cultures, including racial groups and all historical ages, because they [sports] are as fundamental a form of human expression as music, poetry, and painting.

Moreover, '... sports and games provide a touchstone for understanding how people live, work, and think, and may also serve as a barometer of a nation's progress in civilisation' (Cozens and Stumpf 1953, 2).



Despite the prevailing pessimism about sports, sports have been an essential institutional component of different societies all over the world. They have been connected to the physical development and education of humans. They have been adopted as measures to access good health and strong character and confidence, improve physical abilities, and express religious, devotional and ritual pursuits and spirituality.

Sports, politics and society

Sports have been related to politics, military establishments, and national security in every culture since the dawn of humanity. Sparta's sports helped her build strong warriors. Sword fighting, fencing, wrestling and boxing in different societies, and martial arts like Okinawan Karate and AmaXhosa *Intonga* (stick fighting) created fighters to protect the security of those societies (see, for example, Poliakoff 1989). Presently, like in the past, fitness through sports is considered a primary factor in the maintenance of national security in many countries.

It is possible to galvanise the power of sports for popular support of national interest. Sports have shaped and influenced aspects of the course of the local progressive politics of several modern polities as well as international multi-national political diplomacy. For example, the era of the emergence of fascist powers in Europe after World War I and the outbreak of World War II, and the period of fierce political struggles among major international powers after the war, demonstrated the tremendous influence of sports in politics and vice versa, particularly on the international diplomatic scene. Sports became tools of political propaganda and shapers of ideology. Fascist leaders like Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini experimented with the use of sports as political propaganda and control (Gori 2003; Dogliani 2012).

Hitler employed sports to improve German physical fitness for military purposes, motherhood and unity among the youth, and to boost national prestige in international sports competitions. Participation in sports and 'play', especially for the youth, was a duty towards the Third Reich. Leni Riefenstahl's⁸ documentary, *Olympia* reveals how Hitler and his Reich Minister of Propaganda, Paul Joseph Goebbels, used even the spectacle of the Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936 for Nazi political propaganda and to propagate the fallacy of Aryan superiority (Mackenzie 2003). Jesse Owens, an African-American and non-Aryan athlete, had quadruple victories at the 1936 Olympic Games which undermined the myth of Aryan superiority. Owens belonged to a race whose existence and achievements the Nazis hated. Nonetheless, there is controversy over whether or not Hitler congratulated Owens on his achievements. Indubitably, however, his accomplishments sparked the chagrin of racists who knew about them.

Mussolini bared his chest on an alpine ski slope and posed as a model with a sporting persona for young fascists to sharpen his political popularity among the young and encourage them to get laurels for Italy at international sporting engagements.

Moreover, Baron Pierre de Coubertin's idea of reviving the Olympics to give modern sports a gift of new life became debased by the hypocrisy and veiled political intentions of his successors, many of whom were leaders of Western powers. Such powerful political elements seized the Olympics and transmuted it into a platform of an international political race, particularly after World War II, when the ideologically-driven Cold War started between the so-called Western and Eastern Blocs. Many Olympic athletes from 'traditional' Western political powers and emergent global ones were indoctrinated into the conceptions of national prestige and transformed into 'soldiers' of sports ordered to perform exceptionally at international competitions to protect national prestige and ideology.

Communist regimes used sports in a political manner to exact the same ends as the fascists and the Western Bloc. In communist Eastern Europe, sports were ideological incubators of the 'New Socialist Person', and cultivators and sustainers of communist ideas. Vast resources were used to support sports in the communist world, and in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) it culminated in the Moscow Olympics, which many countries boycotted in 1980 because of the invasion of Afghanistan by Russia.

Sports and the human agencies that animate them continue to influence and shape the political progression and history of the world. In that regard, I contend that sports, especially boxing, with their orders, are makers and movers of history. On this note, let me briefly explore the genesis and development of the sport as a local and international sociocultural commodity from the era of classical ancient civilisations to the period of the British Empire in the twentieth century. This will create a historical context for the Ghanaian dimension – the history of boxing in Ghana – from which the biography of Azumah Nelson, which I shall shortly engage with and examine, emanates.

An overview of ancient and modern 'English-style' boxing up to the twentieth century

Fighting with the fist is a natural human phenomenon. It has a sporting dimension. Ancient Sumerian and Khmet (Egyptian) relief carvings of circa the third and second millennia BCE respectively depict scenes of fist fighters and spectators. In 1927, E.A. Speiser, an Assyriologist, found an ancient Mesopotamian stone tablet in Baghdad depicting a pictorial scene of bare-fist prizefighters (Lee-Barron 2011). Some Minoan reliefs have similar scenes. The *Boxing Boys* fresco, an archaeological find from c.1550



BCE Minoan Crete, confirms an early employment of gloves (Minoan Crete n.d.). The mention of fist fighting in the *Vedas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* evidences its existence in the ancient Indus Valley civilisation (Lee-Barron 2011).

Before the Greeks ushered in the Olympics in 776 BCE (Touny and Wenig 1969, 9, 76, 79), Egypt indulged in organised competitive sports, including boxing with rules. Boxing with rules, therefore, has a history thousands of years old in Egypt (Touny and Wenig 1969, 22), whose civilisation predates the Graeco-Roman one. The Homeric epics, such as those found in the *Iliad* (Book XXIII, 651 to 696), which introduce the ancient Greeks to us, provide accounts about boxing as an ancient formal sport in Greek culture. The *Iliad* reports that Mycenaean warriors competitively boxed, with codified rules, in tourneys to honour the fallen. The Greeks called it *pygme* or *pygmachia*. It, together with other combat sports like wrestling and *pankration*,⁹ became part of the Olympiad. Boxing first appeared as an Olympic contest in the 23rd Olympiad (688 BCE). The contest for boys appeared in the 41st (Frost 1906, 214). Greek boxing had no weight divisions, measured rings, or set of rounds. Encircled by spectators, fighters battled on a space of hard dirt floor. Holding was illegal. Striking the head, neck, shoulders and stomach and, in some cases, floored opponents was permitted. Observed by judges, fighters fought until one contestant admitted defeat by holding up his index finger or by pointing his finger to his opponent or was knocked out. The Olympics influenced participants to train on *korykos* (punching bags) and wear *himantes* (leather straps) over their hands. These appendages served as gloves. Pieces of wood were later affixed to these leather strap gloves.

During the glorious days of ancient Greece, professional and amateur male boxers received from their trade and Olympic persuasions and pursuits social recognition and rewards like crowns of the leaves of olive, laurel, pine, or wild celery and money. Professional boxing assisted many talented young men of low station to amass wealth that catapulted them upward in the ancient Greek world. Greece became a Roman vassal province in 146 BCE. During the decadent Roman times of bloody and violent sports like the gladiatorial spectacles, boxers fought with *caestus*, which were heavy thongs bound around spiked pieces of metal. The Olympics thrived for some time under the power of the Romans. Eventually the Roman Emperor Flavius Theodosius I, who was a Christian, considered the Olympics and boxing as pagan and unchristian. He consequently proscribed the Olympics in CE 393. By the time of Theodosius II, when the Temple of Zeus in the Altis was burnt c. CE 425/426, the Olympics had effectively ended. An imperial edict from the Christian political authority of the Eastern Roman Empire banned boxing completely in CE 500 because boxing, which could disfigure the visage of man, created in God's image, was sinful. The order had little influence outside that imperial orbit. Therefore, competitive boxing continued

in parts of Europe, especially in major cities in Western Europe, and persisted throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Tenaciously, 'boxing continued to evolve as both a sport and a method of self-defence throughout Europe, but particularly in Italy and especially in the British Isles' (Lee-Barron 2011, 4).

The sport of boxing, which became an integral part of the European sports culture, particularly that of England from the seventeenth century onwards, owes its heritage to the Graeco-Roman sports civilisation. Modern international boxing largely owes its heritage to the boxing culture that developed in England. The English adaptation of boxing reached other lands mainly via British imperialism and colonialism. It is this version that has become a global/international cultural commodity and forms a key part of modern Olympics which, revived by the wealthy Parisian Pierre de Coubertin, was inaugurated in 1896 in Athens, Greece. Because other indigenous pugilistic constructions with different rules exist, such as *asafo atwele* of the Ga in Ghana, *French boxing*, *Thai boxing* and *Burmese boxing*, some countries, for purposes of distinction, refer to the modern international boxing practice as 'English-(style) boxing'.

Sports had a place in the empire-building projects which the British initiated across the globe. Sports assisted Britain to hold on to its vast imperial preserve for longer than it would have otherwise. Through certain structured conduits within sports, such as organisation and ceremony, pattern of participation and exclusion, competition between the imperial power and colonial territories, and strong centralisation of authority in England, especially in London, British cultural power comprising ideas, beliefs, rules and conventions concerning social behaviour was promoted as appropriate forms of behaviour and ordering (control) in the territories within the Empire. Darby observes that football, a favourite pastime in Africa, was originally used in the imperial agenda 'to socialise African populations into accepting colonial social and political norms' (Darby 2013, 230; see also Darby 2000, 61–87). Many of the introduced sporting constructions and their attendant cultural beliefs and behaviour have persisted beyond the end of the formal Empire with consequences for the postcolonial order. Sports, serving as tools of cultural manipulation, became part of the cultural power [hegemony] of British imperialism. This is consistent with how Antonio Gramsci (Davidson 1968), elaborating the idea of hegemony, emphasises how values supportive of dominant interests in society get passed on as 'shared values' to the masses/dominated group(s) and, once accepted by the manipulated latter as benign, useful, legitimate and 'right', come to reinforce their domination by the former/elite. Consequently, the hegemony and control for the manipulators are enhanced, because manipulation mutes the strains and tensions associated with the unequal allocation of values in society. In Gramscian thought, hegemony is the result of a bloc of interests united behind a common set of values and norms, which, upon



being transmitted to the mass of people through the multitudinous institutions of society – which could include an illusory notion of shared values in sports – reinforce the power of that bloc. Hence, the idea of shared sports and values, operating within a political arrangement of ‘the ruled’ and ‘rulers’, dually gives political voice/vocal noise (phône) as expression of the useful to the ruled, and political speech (logos) as the expression of justice and power to the rulers.

From the Gramscian argument, sports, which appear as egalitarian, could be manipulated by a ruling class, for example in a colonial environment, to maintain hegemony and cultural control over the subjected class (masses), since the feeling of shared beliefs tends to suppress the spirit of antagonism and insurrection from the masses against the privileged. In the light of these thoughts, sports could serve as a powerful but largely informal social institution that could create shared beliefs and attitudes between ‘rulers’ and ‘the ruled’ while, at the same time, enhancing the social binary division and distance between them. Sports, therefore, facilitated the cultural transfer of dominant British beliefs about social behaviour, standards, relations and conformity to her colonial territories.¹⁰ The promotion of British-controlled sports and game codes and their system of values in colonial schools and social clubs, mainly by agents of cultural power and shared values of British imperialism such as churches and colonial administrators, influenced generations of students, Christians and ordinary members of communities. Many colonial elements imbibed these ‘healthy’ and ‘honourable’ sports, which were connected to the civilising properties related to aspects of the British cultural collage that was being built in the colonial territories in the interest of British hegemony. This subconscious element of British cultural imperialism, capable of getting people to involuntarily assimilate foreign values outside the bounds of formal policymaking, rendered the institution of sports a powerful factor in the maintenance of and reaction to British control throughout the Empire.

For example, cricket, tennis, boxing and polo became major conduits for conveying the ‘proper’ and ‘honourable’ British moral values and codes from the imperial agents to autochthonous populations. Colonial governors, who doubled as administrators and sportsmen, were keen in emphasising a sport like cricket as a symbolised ceremonial demonstration, but highly persuasive subliminal stimulus, of British behaviour, standards, and moral codes both public and private. Governor Lord George Canning Harris of late-nineteenth century Bombay, himself a cricket player and administrator, is a good illustration. He believed that some selected groups of Indians could cultivate political responsibility if they assimilated the playing and behavioural codes of cricket (Harris 1921). In parts of the West Indies, similar interests were pursued by governors such as Sir Augustus W.L. Hemming and Sir James Shaw Hay (Williams 1913, 229; Hawke 1924, 165). At the peak of empire

then, sports as a cultural bond had considerable force, conveying through its many forms a moral and behavioural code that bonded the imperial power with many, if not most, of the influential colonial segments. Even after empire, sports, in the form of the Commonwealth Games, facilitated and expressed a so-called symbolic cultural unity of ‘colonies’ in empire, and their bond with their ‘enlightener’ and hegemon, Britain.

How did fist fighting, which has a long history in Europe, become a popular sports commodity – boxing – in English society? Records of classical boxing activity disappeared after the fall of the Roman Empire. But fist fighting as a sport endured in parts of Europe.

Traceable to the classical tradition, fist fighting strongly evolved like a new phoenix emerging from its own ashes to regain the freshness of youth between the late-seventeenth century and early-eighteenth century. James Figg was one of the famous pioneer professionals of the popular masses-oriented sport called bare-knuckle pugilism or prizefighting in England. He became a bare-knuckle champion around 1719. Credited for coining the popular boxing phrases of ‘The manly art of self-defence’ and ‘Third man in the ring’, Figg established a school in London to teach the sport in a scientific way. His travels around England and sparring exhibitions further attracted people to the sport. From the eighteenth century onwards, this sport steadily infiltrated regions where the English sought colonies.

Bare-knuckle prizefighting in its heyday in England thrived in an atmosphere of boisterous and uproarious aggression that was a feature of eighteenth-century urban social life and occasion for sports. Early fighting had no written rules, weight divisions or round limits, and no referee. In general, it was very chaotic. John ‘Jack’ Broughton, who reigned as heavyweight champion from 1740 to 1750, codified and introduced the first ‘boxing rules’ (the Broughton Rules) on 11 August 1743 (Fleischer and Andre 1959, 12). William ‘Butcher of Cumberland’ Augustus, the 3rd Duke of Cumberland, sponsored the rules. Broughton innovated a 24-feet (7.3 m)-square ring surrounded by ropes. He invented and encouraged the use of horse hair gloves (mufflers, a form of padded gloves, for training and exhibitions) (‘Sport, Ancient and Modern: Boxing’ 1911). Daniel ‘the Jew’ Mendoza, who reigned as champion from 1794 to 1795, also taught the sport (Rennie 2006, 120). The Pugilistic Society of London (1814–1861) replaced Broughton’s Rules with the innovative London Prize Ring Rules (LPRR) in 1838 (Rennie 2006, 119). The LPRR were revised by the Pugilistic Association’s Revised Rules in 1853, and then superseded by the ‘Rules of the London Prize Ring’ or ‘New Rules of the Pugilistic Benevolent Society’ in 1866. The latter became the benchmark for fighting until the last bare-knuckle championships bout sometime around 1889. After 1889, the use of gloves, a practice which still prevails, became the order of the day (Rennie 2006, 120).



The sport acquired some following from pockets of the aristocracy. Some simply liked the thrill of the fights; others liked the sport because of the tranquilising effect it had on eighteenth-century English society. Before the emergence of boxing as a crafty variety of self-defence,¹¹ the foremost route to the resolution of an issue of honour was duel by pistol or sword. Duelling demanded and nurtured politeness and conferred some restrictions on conduct, yet it also motivated rogues, bullies and adventurers to use terror to push their way into high society (Besant 1902, 358–359). The gun and blade combats produced inescapable and needless dread and deaths. Fist fights therefore became a less lethal option. In other words, by presenting a different, less fatal ground of honour, pugilism and boxing made duels unacceptable and outdated (Trevelyan 1922, 170). The therapeutic and functional effect that pugilism had on society is perfectly communicated in a piece written by the renowned boxing chronicler of the eighteenth century, Pierce Egan. He wrote:

Where, *then*, is the relative, however high in pride and pomp, on viewing the father, husband, or brother, killed in a duel – but what would rather than they should have had recourse of the manly defence of BOXING, than the deadly weapons of sword and ball; from which a bloody nose, or black eye, might have been the only consequence to themselves, and their families, and neither in their feelings or their circumstances been injured; reconciliation with their antagonist – faults mutually acknowledged – and, perhaps become inseparable friends ever afterwards. (Egan 2006, 13)

As bare-knuckle prizefighting became a major popular spectacle in England at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century, huge sums of money were gathered on the outcome of fights. Consequently, ‘fixing’ emerged in the sport, and fights and referees could be bought. Fights could last three or four hours and have a hundred or more rounds. The punishment both fighters received became immense. The sport became too barbaric for English society’s evolving sophistication. Consequently, it sunk into popular disrepute and obscurity, particularly during the second half of the nineteenth century, in the face of England’s changing moral climate.

Certainly, openly expressed Victorian sensitivities, antagonised by the crime and brutality, high-profile fixing, spectator riots, and the high rate of death, disability and brain damage related to prizefights, initiated the formal transformation of bare-knuckle prizefighting in the 1860s to modern boxing. This new creation generally followed the Marquess of Queensberry Boxing Rules whose development started c.1865 (Gardiner et al. 2006, 621) under the authorship of John Graham Chambers and the patronage of Lord Queensberry. The rules, officially published in 1867, specified a fair stand-up boxing match. Bouts took place in a roped ring on grass and involved the use of bloated gloves of the same size. They also involved timing:

rounds were to be three minutes long with one-minute rest intervals between rounds. A fighter was to be given a ten-second count if he was knocked down. Generally, kicking, head-butting, holding, tripping, spitting, pushing, biting, wrestling, hitting with any part of the arm except the knuckles of a closed fist, and hitting the groin areas were prohibited.

Despite the gradual emergence of modern boxing, some bare-knuckle prizefights continued in English society. The English case of *R v. Coney* (1882) 8 QBD 534 deemed bare-knuckle fights as assaults occasioning actual bodily harm, despite the consent of the participants (Gardiner, O'Leary, Welch, Boyes, and Naidoo 2006, 597, 621–622, 642). Consequently, such fighting became 'unlawful because of its tendency to cause a breach of the peace' (Gardiner et al. 2006, 621). This legally manifested the end of widespread public bare-knuckle contests in England (Gardiner et al. 2006, 597, 621–622, 642).

Modern ringcraft continued in England and Britain in general under the new strategic and defensive styles of the Queensberry rules. The sport thus appeared relatively safe, with serious injury less likely. The relatively safe yet 'manly' activity attracted participants from different social classes in England. More so, it became a great proletarian sport of the public of late Victorian and twentieth-century Britain. It was the public's unquenchable passion and affection for the tradition and history of the sport of fist fights in England that engendered the creation of modern boxing. A compelling reason, perhaps, for the continued legality of the Queensberry modern boxing, in England and Britain in general, stemmed from the fear that banning it would surely have sent fighting 'underground' and outside the supervision of the sport's governing institutions, the betting boards of control and, most importantly, the medical advisory boards.

Modern boxing spread within the England-led British Empire, including the USA, and other parts of the world. It became very popular in the USA, especially in the twentieth century. Published in 1867 and subsequently reviewed and modified, the Queensberry rules have generally governed modern international boxing. The professional and amateur dimensions of the sport fell under internationally recognised sanctioning commissions and bodies such as the World Boxing Council (WBC), the World Boxing Association (WBA), the World Boxing Federation (WBF), the International Boxing Council (IBC), the International Boxing Authority (IBA), the World Boxing Organisation (WBO) and the Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur (AIBA).

Significantly, modern boxing has more to it than bodily pain and bruises, attack and defence with the fists, combat, contestants, and the concepts and regulations of the Marquess of Queensbury. Its meanings, values and symbols are more than the glamorised and more visible public dimension of it, especially at the higher levels,



as an individual and competitive quest for thrills and riches. Frances Cress Welsing (MD)¹² has aptly declared its twentieth-century variant as a highly symbolic activity inscribed with both visible and invisible codes, ciphers and symbols. Such secret messages, while impacting at the subconscious and unconscious levels of the brain, escape conscious screening and control over the behavioural outflow that has been stimulated by the symbol. However, the symbolisms in the behaviour of boxing are decodable and definable; they could unveil racism, 'the problem of the colour-line' in the USA and on the global scene, and explicate its inner intricacies (Welsing 1991, 209–218). Welsing equates racism with what she perceives as 'white supremacy' (Welsing 1991, i), that is, 'the local and global power system structured and maintained by persons who classify themselves as white, whether consciously or subconsciously determined' (Welsing 1991, ii). Racism 'consists of patterns of perception, logic, symbol formation, thought, speech, action, and emotional response, as conducted simultaneously in all areas of people activity, (economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war)', to prevent what Welsing calls 'white genetic annihilation'. It is 'a strategy for white genetic survival' (Welsing 1991, ii). In the same vein, Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice* conceptualised boxing as a representation of masculinity for the so-called 'black' and 'white' racial groupings, especially in the USA. 'The boxing ring is the ultimate focus of masculinity in [patriarchal] America, the two-fisted testing ground of manhood, and the heavyweight champion, as a symbol, is the real Mr America' (Cleaver 1968, 84). Moreover, '... boxing, and the heavyweight championship in particular, serves as the ultimate test of masculinity, based on the perfection of the body and its use' (Cleaver 1968, 86).

Through time and societies, sports, including boxing, have had multiple meanings. As Coakley and Lever (2000, 2985) have argued, 'sports come in many forms, and those forms can have, [do have and will continue to have] many different associated [inner] social meanings [and values]'. They indicate that 'organized sports were implicated in processes of social development and the structure of family life, socialization and education, identity formation and government policy, commodification and the economy, and globalization and the media'.

Nevertheless, as a social activity or the subject of popular discourse, boxing is either captivating or repulsive, cherished or despised, applauded or criticised, and/or leaves some persons indifferent. It usually elicits near schizophrenic and schizoid responses (Early 1995, 319–331). Whereas some individuals and groups such as the World Medical Association (WMA) have advocated that boxing should be banned because it is an anti-human sport, and incompatible with a good healthy lifestyle, boxing has been seen as a powerful aspect of popular culture.¹³ It has gained the participation and attention of the so-called underprivileged in society, as well as some of the twentieth century's political figures and international icons in other fields of

endeavour. Examples of the political figures and international icons include Theodore Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin Dada, Nelson Mandela, I.K. Acheampong and J.J. Rawlings. They were either amateurs and/or aficionados of boxing because of their love for its aesthetics and the conviction that boxing could negotiate positive ideological, health, recreational, social and political change in their lives and society. The two heads of state of Ghana, Acheampong and Rawlings, showed a great interest in boxing. They supported the significant careers of champions like D.K. Poison and Azumah Nelson respectively. As politicians, they knew the relevance of boxing to the promotion of Ghana's image internationally and they recognised the benefits that their governments and Ghana could derive from the victories of these boxers. The international victories of the boxers were good recipes for national cohesion and solidarity. In search of strength, fame and leisure through sports, Idi Amin Dada, the soldier who became Uganda's president, was the heavyweight boxing champion of Uganda for about nine years (Mazrui 1977, 189–215).

For its aesthetics as a scientific display of self-defence and a physical exercise for shaping the body, boxing was pursued and given attention by Roosevelt, who became the twenty-sixth president of the USA. He '... boxed with gloves at Harvard University, sparred with Mike Donovan, a former bare-knuckle middleweight champion, and received John L. Sullivan at the White House' (Nasaw 1987, 262–263). Boxing, therefore, was a significant part in 'the strenuous life'¹⁴ of Theodore Roosevelt.

Hitler saw physical exercise through sports and gymnastics as important to produce 'physically powerful', versatile and bold individuals needed to constitute a nation. Hence, he perceived boxing as a necessity in his grand agenda of nation-building. In Chapter 2 – 'The State' – of his *Mein Kampf*, he emphasised the following:

Here especially one kind of sport must not be forgotten which in the eyes of many 'nationals' [folks] is considered as brutal and undignified: boxing. It is incredible what erroneous opinions are current about this in the circles of the 'educated'. That the young man learns to fence and then goes about fighting duels is looked upon as natural and honourable, but that he boxes is supposed to be brutal! Why? There is no sport that, like this, promotes the spirit of aggression in the same measure, demands determination quick as lightening, [and] educates the body for steel-like versatility. If two young people fight out a difference of opinion with their fists it is no more brutal than if they do so with a piece of ground iron. (Hitler 1940, 616)

Moreover, he added:

Also, it is not less noble if one who has been attacked wards off his attacker with his fists instead of running away and calling for a policeman. But above all the young and healthy boy has to learn to be beaten.... Thus, the meaning



of sports [and especially boxing] [in the folkish State] is not only to make the individual strong, versatile and bold, but it has also to harden him and to teach him how to bear inclemencies. (Hitler 1940, 616)

Mandela also boxed as an amateur because he thought it was a noble art of self-defence. He disclosed in Part Four – ‘The Struggle is My Life’ – of his *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* that:

Although I had boxed a bit at Fort Hare, it was ... in Johannesburg that I took up the sport in earnest. I was never an outstanding boxer ... in the heavyweight division, and I had neither enough power ... nor enough speed ... I did not enjoy the violence of boxing so much as the science of it. I was intrigued by how one moved one's body to protect oneself, how one used a strategy both to attack and retreat, how one paced oneself over a match. (Mandela 1994, 192–193)

Situating boxing in the contexts of racial equity and racism, and physical health, he disclosed that amateur boxing also captivated him because of the mental energy and physical vitality it gave him in his daily struggle and ‘fight’ against apartheid.

Boxing is egalitarian. In the ring, rank, age, color, and wealth are irrelevant. When you are circling your opponent, probing his strengths and weaknesses, you are not thinking about his color or social status. I never did any real fighting after I entered politics. My main interest was in training; I found the rigorous exercise to be an excellent outlet for tension and stress. After a strenuous workout, I felt both mentally and physically lighter. It was a way of losing myself in something that was not the struggle. After an evening's workout I would wake up the next morning feeling strong and refreshed, ready to take up the fight again. (Mandela 1994, 193)

Certainly, the complexity and deeper social, economic, political and cultural significances and purposes of the sport of boxing have sustained it as an essential activity for different groups worldwide; by the same token, it is followed by countless individuals globally.

In Ghana, sports are well-loved aspects of life. Some are of local origin and others, starting from the era of European contact, were assimilated from other parts of the world. Apart from football (soccer), boxing is the most popular sport in Ghana. It was introduced and formalised in the country *circa* the 1930s by the British colonial administration. One of the reasons for its formalisation into mainstream popular culture in the colonial territory was the administration's attempts to stem the violence associated with an ancient indigenous type of organised fisticuff sport called *asafo atwele*. Originally created and initiated in Accra, the colonial capital town and the region of the Ga ethnic group, *asafo atwele* was the brainchild of, and popular among, the respected Ga-Mashie division/community in the colony of Gold Coast.

Boxing as an organised popular sport first took hold in Accra where the Ga-Mashie resorted to the European style when their free-for-all bare-knuckle fight – *asafo atwele* – was banned. In terms of participation and excellence, the Ga, especially those from the ‘slum’ Bukom division of the Ga-Mashie locality, dominated the sport and became a factory of many and great boxers in Ghana.

Boxing was used by such slum-dwelling participants, especially in Accra and other urban centres, as a tool for social mobility. This popular culture was not simply a continuation of the *asafo atwele* ancient martial art. Within the colonial and postcolonial milieu, it provided a platform for the negotiation of personal and social advancement and identity, and positive transformation, as strength and skills were exhibited to gain social recognition, wealth and respect. It served as, and has continued to be, an avenue for making quick money and/or travel abroad, particularly to England, which came with some social prestige, especially during the colonial era. Furthermore, it was subtly employed by local boxers who hoped to compete against European boxers on the international stage to challenge notions of colonial and European administrative authority and racial superiority pervading the colonial period. Finally, it was used by some postcolonial governments to achieve political goals.

The history of boxing in Ghana is garnished with the accomplishments of some notable boxers and world-class champions. The list includes Roy ‘Black Flash’ Ankrah, British Empire featherweight champion, 1950s; Floyd ‘Klutei the Real’ Robertson, Commonwealth featherweight champion, 1960s; Ike Quartey, Snr, Olympics silver medallist, 1960s; and David Kotei, (hereafter D.K. Poison or D.K.), the first Ghanaian to win the WBC featherweight title in 1975. Azumah ‘Zoom Zoom’, ‘Professor’ Nelson won the WBC featherweight title in 1984 and added the super-featherweight title in 1988. He dominated that level until 1997. Nana Yaw Konadu became the African Boxing Union (ABU)¹⁵ flyweight titlist in 1986. Within a decade, he captured other titles such as the Commonwealth flyweight, African bantamweight, WBC International super-flyweight, IBC super-flyweight and WBA World bantamweight.

These luminaries inspired other contemporary Ghanaian boxing greats who, between 1992 and 2001, became coveted world champions. Ike ‘Bazooka’ Quartey became the WBC International light-welterweight champion in 1992 and the WBA World welterweight titlist in 1994. Alfred ‘Cobra’ Kotey was WBO bantamweight champion in 1994 and the WBC International super-bantamweight champion in 1995. Alex ‘Ali’ Baba secured the WBC International flyweight title in 1996, and during the first decade of the twenty-first century, Joseph Agbeko snatched the WBF and the International Boxing Federation (IBF) bantamweight titles.

These personalities earned fame, social recognition and popular admiration, but they also helped to shape Ghanaian popular culture through sports. Their acquired



status served as an inspiration to people in many ways and contributed to the quest for positive socioeconomic transformation in the lives of individuals and communities. Furthermore, many boxers, through their accomplishments, have promoted the name of Ghana on the international diplomatic and sporting scene. They also helped, whenever they undertook sporting tasks in the name of the country, to stimulate social cohesion by bringing people together as a nation in the spirit of patriotism and support. Their fighting spectacles helped to release people from the stress and tension caused by the routine of work, familial responsibility and diverse social issues. Some of them became philanthropists, built social infrastructure, and set up businesses to provide employment, social security and economic mobility. Undoubtedly, the social, economic and political contributions that boxing and its actors have made in Ghana are obvious and historical. Yet historians have not paid much attention to these elements in the historiography of Ghana.

The lacuna in Ghanaian historiography

The historiography of Ghana, with reference to the colonial era, and a considerable portion of the postcolonial, period, *circa* the first 50 years, reveals a field where political and economic history has received tremendous attention. The areas of social and cultural history have not received the same attention, due to what could be referred to as 'political and economic history bias'. This has created a prevailing glaring lacuna in the historiography of Ghana. Within the postcolonial dispensation, grants and scholarships for research have not been directed towards scholarly undertakings and enquiries in cultural and social history because they are perceived not to be oriented towards development and applied research. This is counterproductive to Ghanaian historiography and can atrophy the humanities.

When the Historical Society of Ghana (HSG) was resuscitated in 2001, it immediately realised this bias and lacuna, and strongly advocated for social and cultural history, calling on old and young historical researchers to take greater interest in those areas. The HSG emphasised the nurturing of the tradition of biographies and areas such as public, sports and urban history. This growing concern for the creation of historiographical diversity in Ghana inspired the production of this study, which sits comfortably in the category of sports history.

I have already underscored the fact that this book focuses on both the social history of boxing in Ghana and the biography of the boxer, Azumah Nelson. But why have I placed a biography within the context of a social history of a sport? In short, because the history of sports in Ghana and its contribution to nation-building cannot be complete without the lives of the main gladiators. The history of boxing, especially, would be deficient without the human agents who have acted in the ring. Elsewhere, key sportspersons of national and international repute have

been subjects of historical studies. For example, boxers like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Muhammad Ali – formerly Cassius Clay – and Mike Tyson have had histories and biographies written about them in the USA. Such works have unveiled the forces that conditioned their personalities and their legacies to their immediate communities, country and humankind. Furthermore, movies and video documentaries such as *Cinderella Man* (2005), *Unforgivable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2005), *Tyson* (c. 2009), *Gentleman Jim* (2007), *Muhammad Ali, the Greatest: a film* (2002), *Ali* (2002), and *Muhammad Ali: Heavyweight Champion* (1994), which benefited from scholarly research, have raised public awareness of how some key boxers, in their capacity as both popular icons and ordinary people, have influenced their societies in diverse ways.

From a plethora of qualified choices, this book has chosen Azumah Nelson as its biographical subject because of his role in the development of popular culture in Ghana, his sporting excellence in boxing, and his reputation as a philanthropist and social activist. He is a national hero in Ghana, where he has ethnic ties to Ga-Mashie. Intriguingly, he is also a descendant of Afro-Brazilian returnees who created the Tabon (also spelled Tabom) community in Accra after repatriating to parts of West Africa in the nineteenth century. In Nigeria, they set up the Lagosian community of the Aguda or Amaro.

Azumah Nelson possessed devastating punches, extraordinary energy and lightning swiftness. Boxing pundits and critics considered him the greatest boxing champion born in Africa and one of the greatest boxers of all time. He was among the top hundred boxers of the twentieth-century world (see *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson* DVD 2010). His professional journey produced an impressive record of 46 fights. In all, he clinched 39 victories, of which 28 were knockouts (KOs) (*BoxRec*. Boxing's Official Record Keeper). The rest were two draws and six losses, with one of the losses occurring in a post-retirement bout in 2008. This is truly the record of a legend. Azumah Nelson became the first living continental African in the prestigious International Boxing Hall of Fame of the pantheon of 'apotheosised' world-class greats of the 'noble art of self-defence' such as Jack Broughton, Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, Rocky Marciano, Archie Moore, Jack Dempsey, Sugar Ray Robinson, Benny Leonard and Henry Armstrong.¹⁶

Azumah Nelson emerged from Bukom, Accra, into the international limelight as a fine boxer. On the wings of Ghanaian boxing, he became a million-dollar entrepreneur and historical figure overnight. As a social product of his indigenous society and its boxing history, he boxed, made it a sterling livelihood to support himself and others, and applied it to further inscribe the name of Ghana in the international psyche. He transcended some of the narrow and pessimistic readings of the sport as an uncivilised endeavour moulded in animal brutality that is inferior, dangerous



and, at worst, fatal, and, at best, could bring nothing more than material wealth. In pessimistic vein, Sammons, in his historical study of boxing, for instance, concluded that it is 'one of the supreme anomalies of our time [twentieth century]' (Sammons 1988, 235). Nonetheless, for Azumah Nelson, boxing, which in 1824 acquired the designation 'sweet science of bruising' (Early, 1995, 319), was more than just bruises and a quest for prize money. It was, he confessed in October 2010, 'my life. It has made me what I am today'. 'What do you gain from boxing?' an orphan at the SOS Village in Tema once asked him. He answered that 'he raises the flag of Ghana in the international sporting arena and also makes himself popular and rich' (Mensah, *Graphic Sports (GS)*, March 24–30, 1992, 3). It was not just a sport and 'show business of blood' which he joined because of a need to play and/or to satisfy a sadomasochist urge. It was a negotiator of identity for him; a tool to shape and support his identity as a Ga-Mashie person, to realign and re-orientate his socioeconomic status, and to make him a key figure with international acclaim. With boxing, he further etched Ghana and the boxing prowess of Africa into the consciousness of the powerful world of international sports and diplomatic relations. His status as a local hero and national icon became a symbol of hope and inspiration for many young people in Ghana. He became a social activist and focused on impacting meaningfully on Ghana's (and Africa's) agenda of social advancement for people and communities.

In many ways Azumah Nelson's story fits in with the idea of Horace Mann, the nineteenth century American politician and education reformer, that 'Biography, especially of the great and good, who have risen by their own exertions to eminence and usefulness, is an inspiring and ennobling study. Its direct tendency is to reproduce the excellence it records' (quoted in Marden 2005, xxiv, 421).

Azumah Nelson: Boxing in Ghanaian identity and society

The objective of producing this biography-cum-social history of boxing in Ghana, therefore, is to show how boxing has contributed to shaping identities and positive socioeconomic transformations in Ghana through the life, work and experiences of Azumah Nelson. It should provide inspiration and lessons to lovers of sports and offer insights that can positively help policymakers to overhaul the sports industry in Ghana and Africa as a whole. Azumah Nelson's out-of-the-ring success in life testifies that boxing is not just entertainment but also a business that can improve the lot of the socioeconomically desperate and less fortunate in society.

The dimension of this publication that concerns itself with probing the social history of boxing in Ghana leans heavily on an exploration of and discussion about the origins and development of boxing as a sport, transplanted to Gold Coast

(Ghana) from England and how it took root and gained acceptance in Africa as a contemporary sport.

The biographical aspect of this work rests on an analytical historical narrative that turns 'inside out' Azumah Nelson's life, career and social work, and his relationship, as an individual, with society. It interrogates the historical and cultural context of the indigenous ethnic society into which Azumah Nelson was born and how, as a person in society, this shaped his psyche and social orientation. Moreover, it examines the social, economic and political milieu within which he grew and lived, especially during his formative years as a boy, adolescent and youth. In other words, it investigates his personality and character traits, and the environment, comprising the people and the prevailing social and political ideology that surrounded him as a ghetto youth. The forces that influenced him to take up boxing as a profession, and the dream(s) and psychology that encouraged him to persevere to become a world champion, his major fights, victories and defeats, and his contribution to society as a businessperson and philanthropist are discussed in this book.

This publication therefore brings to life the genesis of modern-day prizefighting in Ghana and Azumah Nelson's legacy to boxing, popular culture and sports as a whole. Within these pages are clues and suggestions about how boxing in particular and sports in general can be developed in Ghana and Africa as outlets for recreation and yielders of positive economic returns for general social advancement. Hence, this work is a contribution to the unending search, by Ghanaian and African governments, for innovative ideas to promote social developmental policies and agendas. I hope that this study will encourage the writing of more instructive scholarly biographies and histories of popular sports icons and sports that we celebrate.

Propositions and interrogating the subject

This study, which perceives sports as natural concomitants of social interaction, capable of promoting and consolidating social harmony and economic growth, and sportspersons as inspirers of creativity and determination, is conceptually anchored by some fundamental propositions. The detailed arguments of this book reside in two basic observations about boxing in Ghana. First, boxing in Ghana's colonial and postcolonial periods was and has been a tool used by groups and outstanding individual sporting personalities for the mediation and negotiation of personal, group and national identities. Second, sporting personalities, with particular reference to Azumah Nelson, make a tremendous contribution to the socioeconomic and cultural advancement of a nation, and in this context, of Ghana.

Answers to some fundamental questions provided the key blocks for the building of this narrative on boxing and Azumah Nelson. Such questions included: (a) *Why*



did the British introduce boxing and what was its political, governance, social control, and economic significance for the colonial regime and subjects? (b) Who played what pioneering role(s) in the consolidation of boxing and why, where, and when did this consolidation start? (c) What accounted for Ga-Mashie's and especially Bukom's proverbial gravitation to and excellence in the sport? (d) Did the location of Ga-Mashie within the urbanised colonial administrative capital of Gold Coast, which allowed it to have first-hand contact with the colonial administrators who introduced modern-day pugilism into Accra, influence this 'gravitation and appetite' for boxing? (e) Did the indigenous fisticuff martial art of the Ga-Mashie, which was used to toughen the body and make it a Spartan-like fighting machine, settle disputes, and instil a warrior and fighting spirit in young men, influence them to adopt the Europe-originated boxing construction into their sporting lifestyle? (f) Why did Azumah Nelson join the so-called 'sport of the desperate' and was he fulfilled? (g) Has Azumah Nelson influenced the processes of personal and social empowerment for many in Ghana? (h) What are his perceptions about Ghanaian boxing and sports and how could their potential be improved and promoted for national advancement? (i) Could his experiences be utilised to enhance the boxing industry?

The answers to questions (b) and (c), for example, have offered a significant measure of understanding about an ethnic group's achievements and contribution to the shaping of popular culture in Ghana, and how certain so-called 'underprivileged' and 'less fortunate' people and communities have contributed to the growth of national sports. Answers to question (f) have also provided an elucidation about why Azumah Nelson joined a glamorous, empowering, artful and lucrative profession, and from another viewpoint, one that resembles, in crudeness, costs and brutality, the ancient gladiatorial spectacle in which slaves were used fatally for the pleasure and profit of others. Contextualised within the academic literature on Ghanaian, African and Africana history and culture studies, this study is an addition to the discourse on popular culture and social empowerment through sports. It is an intellectual deliberation on how the lives and sporting activities of historical sportspersons are vistas into sociocultural interactions, practices and developments in colonial and postcolonial Ghana. Additionally, this publication, which contains aspects of the general history of Brazilian returnees – the Tabon – to Ghana, contributes to the prevailing intellectual discourse on and about the historic and contemporary contributions of people of the African Diaspora in making a Black Atlantic world in parts of Africa.

Review of related literature

There is a dearth of scholarship and academic literature that provide in-depth historical enquiry into Azumah Nelson's experiences in boxing and analyse them in

the context of the history of sports and boxing in Ghanaian popular culture. Apart from *The Professor: The Life Story of Azumah Nelson* (2014), a work by Australian sports journalist Ashley Morrison, which was published when I was writing this book, my PhD thesis (2011), the foundation of this book, is a major work on Ghana's boxing history and the main academic biography that examines the personality, career and fighting techniques of Azumah Nelson who, to use Olsen's term, is a 'key functionary' (Olsen 1978, 25–26) in Ghana's boxing history and sociology. Morrison's is interesting but it does not provide adequate historical and cultural contexts, both local and international, within which Ghanaian boxing evolved, and in which Azumah Nelson acted. My book differs from Morrison's because it reveals the local and international creative forces that formed Ghanaian boxing, opens up a detailed social history of Ghanaian boxing, and inserts the life and professional work of Azumah Nelson into it. My readers will perceive how this history and Azumah Nelson symbiotically influenced each other. Furthermore, my book is different for two more reasons. First, it demonstrates how the individuality and character of Azumah Nelson, as an active member in his ethnic group, served as key builders of one of Ghana's favourite pursuits – boxing. Second, it shows how the cultural activity of boxing contributed to individual and ethnic identity formation and national development. The works of Deku (1969) and Vieta (1990) have also touched on sections of sports history in Ghana. Deku's work is a cursory outline of the organisation of competitive 'modern' sport within the national setting. It explains that football, athletics, boxing, lawn tennis (tennis), table tennis, basketball and hockey, among other sports constructions, were selected by the government, particularly after independence, as tools for national growth. Vieta, positing that sports can enrich culture and life; mould the character of individuals by inculcating a sense of discipline, tolerance, perseverance and industry; and engender innovation, excellence and good health in the individual (1990, 561), dedicates a section of his book to brief biographical sketches of a number of 'distinguished' sports personalities of Ghana, excluding Azumah Nelson, in the twentieth century. He briefly examines the place of sports within the indigenous environment and the development of some organised sports under the agency of British colonialism. These commendable works of Deku and Vieta, considering their general outlook, are, however, not in-depth studies about the history of Ghanaian boxing and its relationship with the biography of Azumah Nelson.

Nii Anum Telfer and Azumah Nelson's joint authored booklet, *Azumah Nelson, The Professor: 12 Rounds of Boxing and Life* (2009), uses simple metaphors drawn from Azumah Nelson's childhood and his difficult boxing life as motivational aids to readers, particularly students. The co-authors liken the inherent dynamics in boxing, such as hardship and survival, and success and failure, to dynamics in life. They suggest that although like boxing, the journey of life – including endeavours like



schooling, business and sports – is full of difficulties, the spirit of perseverance, hard work, spirituality, hope, confidence, time management, discipline and preparedness guided Azumah Nelson's life and made him progress from financial poverty and social obscurity to financial sufficiency and international fame and acclaim. This instructional manual to life, which is certainly not a scholarly work, equips this publication with information about some of the boxer's attitudes and beliefs that helped him to achieve a successful career and legendary status. Such first-hand information, from the boxer himself, assisted in the formulation of aspects of the discussion in the latter part of this publication.

Akyeampong (2002) and Dunzendorfer (2011; 2014) also explored aspects of the history of Ghanaian boxing. Akyeampong sheds some light on boxing and gender, power and class in the indigenous Ga-Mashie community. His work which provides important secondary information about boxing in Ghana and preliminary insight into boxing life in Azumah Nelson's hometown, informs this publication, which innovatively inserts Azumah Nelson's biography into the history of boxing, and draws on aspects of world boxing history to amplify the history of Ghanaian boxing. Dunzendorfer (2011) examines just two decades of boxing's history, while paying little attention to *asafo atwele*. Additionally, Dunzendorfer (2014), using selected heterogeneous media portrayals of boxing in only some issues of 'the Gold Coast/Ghanaian newspaper, *Daily Graphic*, during the 1950s', claims that the 'myth of the origin of boxing' that implements 'the sport to a ... martial tradition [in Ga-Mashie, which] neglects the diversity of the sports origin in Gold Coast/Ghana' was prominently disseminated in the media from the early 1950s. It was 'bound to an urban development ... when ... political changes towards independence turned the affirmation of ethnic identity into a tool ... for political influence' (Dunzendorfer 2014, 1015–1016). Divergent to extant accounts in Ga-Mashie oral traditions and Akyeampong (2002), Dunzendorfer's view, however, does not explain Ga-Mashie's and especially Bukom's proverbial gravitation to and excellence in boxing. Contrary to Dunzendorfer's exegesis, Ga-Mashie oral traditions, as I found, demonstrate that *asafo atwele* and a certain Ga-Mashie habitus that generated and regulated it significantly aided the Ga-Mashie community to easily embrace and sustain a vibrant 'modern' boxing culture from the 1920s and 1930s. It is apparent that the

... story of Gold Coast/Ghana's cradle of boxing in Old Accra [Ga-Mashie] is still relevant today and it is supported by a long list of victorious boxers originating from ... James Town and Ussher Town. (Dunzendorfer 2014, 1027)

Neither Akyeampong nor Dunzendorfer examines, in full, firstly, the historical forces and socio-political theories, such as the concept of hegemony, which scholars such as Antonio Gramsci have elucidated in other contexts of social control (Gramsci

1975; see also Femia 1981; Lears 1985; Parry 1984; Bourdieu 1978; Bourdieu 1991), and which compelled the British colonial regime to anchor boxing in Gold Coast and, secondly, boxing's growth in Ghana during the postcolonial era. The field of biography of sports celebrities, especially boxers, in other places has yielded analytical works on people such as Muhammad Ali (Remnick 1998), Dick Tiger (Ifaturoti 2002) and Joe Louis (Evans 1985). Remnick's study looks at the dynamic intercourse of Ali's celebrity with the United States' national and international politics. Ifaturoti's work on Nigerian boxer Dick Tiger reveals an interesting athlete-in-politics situation by demonstrating how a sporting personality influenced the progressive politics of Nigeria. The work of Evans on Joe Louis displays the African-American boxer as a key figure in the USA during the 1930s. Through the prism of the professional life of Louis, and particularly his match with Max Schmeling, Evans explores racial prejudice and racism in the USA. Although the athlete satisfied an important political ambition of 'White' American society by defeating Schmeling, who that society perceived to represent Nazism, Louis did not escape the attacks of pathological racism which were endemic to that society in the USA. Evans uses the experiences of Louis to illustrate the general dominant response towards racial minorities when the latter occupy key functionary positions traditionally reserved for the former. These biographies demonstrate that the career and celebrity of Azumah Nelson could explain aspects of the history of Ghana's political economy.

The quest to comprehend the proverbial Ga-Mashie gravitation to and appetite for boxing, a foreign sport that was formally imposed by a colonial regime, and understand why Azumah Nelson entered boxing, demands both historical analysis and theoretical understanding about what connects a group to specific sporting activities. Bourdieu's theories (See Bourdieu 1991; 1978; 1988; 1984) on 'sport and social class', 'taste', and 'habitus' are important theoretical perspectives for such theoretical understanding. Bourdieu (1991; 1988) suggests that '[a] sport, like any other practice, is an object of struggles between the fractions of the dominant class and between the social classes' (Bourdieu 1991, 361). Furthermore, the relationship between a social class and its participation in sports depends on spare time, economic and cultural capital, and the meanings and functions attributed to the sports practised by various social classes. Such meanings and functions might be concerned with whether, for example, one wanted to produce a strong, muscular body as in the working class, or a strong, healthy and 'properly' toned body, as in the dominant class. In addition to achieving certain benefits for the body, members of social classes (or *ethnies*) consciously or unconsciously participate in specific sports because of the distinction they can give to their group and the social value which accrues from the pursuit of such sports (Bourdieu 1991, 369). For example, the golf and polo practised at elitist clubs often 'enable the accumulation of social capital' and are a 'pretext for select encounters



... a technique of sociability' (Bourdieu 1991, 372). Thus, an indispensable part of understanding sports participation is the conscious and unconscious orientations of different groups within which the individual exists, toward engaging in practices which they conceive as distinctive, potentially rewarding (economic, cultural and social) and have the ability to reinforce certain social, cultural, economic and political positions within the local and general community. Bourdieu's sociological concept of 'taste' attempts to connect specific classes or class fractions (groups and individuals) to a particular orientation to the future, called *habitus*. *Habitus* is a system of dispositions (lasting, acquired schemes of perception and thought which ultimately determine action), which groups and individuals develop in response to the objective conditions they encounter. These outlooks are linked to a group's relationship to their bodies and to the adoption of specific lifestyles. In the context of sports, Bourdieu contends that since individual classes and class fractions have a different instrumental relationship to the body, they associate that with their common sport preferences. The working class(es) (which in the case of a colonial environment would be the minority nationality) prefer(s) to have a taste for contact sports, (that which, as he states elsewhere, requires 'a considerable investment of effort, sometimes of pain and suffering (e.g. boxing), and sometimes *a gambling with the body itself*') (Bourdieu 1991, 371). The middle class(es), especially the upwardly mobile, gravitate(s) towards activities that lead to an attractive physique – a 'body-for-others' (Bourdieu 1991, 371). The dominant class(es), which in the case of a colonised territory would mainly comprise the colonial administrators and their auxiliary indigenous elites, engage(s) in sporting activities that are played in elitist clubs with little, if any, bodily contact between competitors (Bourdieu 1984, 212–217). Consequently, Bourdieu postulates a general law that

... a sport is more likely to be adopted by a social class [group, people and their individuals] if it does not contradict that class's relation to the body at its deepest and most unconscious level i.e., the body schema, which is the depository of a whole world view and a whole philosophy of the person and the body. (Bourdieu 1984, 217–218; Bourdieu 2010, 215)

In Bourdieu's sociology, *habitus* generates and regulates the practices – lifestyles – that constitute social life. It is therefore crucial and fundamental to social reproduction (Bourdieu 1991, 367). Humans generally learn to want what conditions make possible for them, and not aspire to what is unavailable to them. The conditions in which the individual lives tend to generate sport, art, literature, food and music dispositions compatible with these conditions.

This study applies ideas from Bourdieu's sociology of sports and theoretical concepts about 'sport and social class', 'taste', and 'habitus' in an attempt to explain the

apparent and interesting historical Ga-Mashie–Azumah Nelson boxing nexus and relationship. Although Bourdieu pays attention to social class, a broader conception of social origin, which includes ethnicity, has been appropriated by this study in its examination of the social history of the sport of boxing and its relationship with the Ga-Mashie social group and its member, Azumah Nelson. Consequently, this book views Azumah Nelson's 'appetite' for boxing through the lens of a historic Ga-Mashie habitus for pugilism.

Sources and methods

This publication utilised the qualitative method for a historical interpretation of accessible significant primary and secondary data related to Azumah Nelson and associated with the culture of boxing and sports in Ghana. Such data were obtained from both documentary and non-documentary sources.

Data from the different sources were analytically morticed into the interpretative and narrative fabric of this work. Information was derived from audio-video media, such as audio tapes, VHS tapes, CDs, DVDs and the internet's YouTube,¹⁷ which contain audio and video documentary features on Azumah Nelson's life and career. The audio-video media information provides a rich array of views on the sport and its place in Ghana's past and contemporary periods, and Azumah Nelson's personality, career and fighting ways. Information was accessed from newspapers and archival materials such as national sports documents from the Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra and Cape Coast, Ghana. Some relevant and informative colonial official papers such as letters, documents and correspondence of the different sanctioning bodies of sport and boxing in the country, from the colonial period to the postcolonial era, deposited as archival materials in the regional and the national offices of the PRAAD, were reviewed and used as building blocks for the narrative in the work.

Finding relevant files in the national PRAAD, where files and documents often went through an unending process of re-cataloguing, re-numbering, re-filing and re-location, was not easy. However, a long essay – 'A Descriptive List of Records of the Ministry of Youth and Sports 1949–1980 in the National Archives of Ghana' (Ansah and Gede 1999) – with catalogue number PW (Project Work) 8, fortunately lodged in the repository, became the key archival radar and roadmap for the location of relevant documents in the national PRAAD. That academic project work contains an up-to-date list of relevant files that include documents related to sports and boxing in the country. It has a methodical listing form that systematically identifies the relevant files on sports in the country from 1949 to 1980. It places the files under the record group RG9 – Ministry of Youth and Sports, with the class number RG9/1, including



covering dates for the documents within each file, and offers a brief description of the records it contains.

Informative archival documents, books, articles and theses were obtained from the Ghana Amateur Boxing Association (the GABA), academic libraries at the University of Cambridge, and several public and university libraries in Ghana and England. Others were obtained in print and/or e-documents from the library of the University of South Florida (USF), where I spent some time as a 2010 Global Academic Partnership Scholar. Relevant documents and information were also obtained via academic internet facilities such as Google scholar and JSTOR.

Vansina's work (1965, 1–5), which legitimises oral tradition, including 'myths', as a source of historical facts, informed the study. Consequently, I conducted oral interviews with Azumah Nelson and his social associates. Oral information, however, was cross-checked with secondary sources and vice-versa to reveal any inconsistencies. Various boxing pundits in Ghana, past and incumbent executives of the GABA and the Ghana Boxing Authority (the GBA) such as Samir Captan, boxing coaches, and amateur and occupational boxers were interviewed. The snowballing technique of collecting relevant snippets of oral information also helped the research. Some knowledgeable members of the Ga-Mashie and Tabon community and Azumah Nelson's familial and social associates and childhood friends were interviewed. Most of the interviewees objected to the recording of testimonies, so I took copious notes. Some informal and, interestingly, spontaneous conversations with sports and boxing enthusiasts, sometimes on public transports in Ghana like the commercial buses (*trotro*) and taxis, also provided information about the boxing hero whose popular 'legend' is in the public domain. Through conversations and interviews, I solicited views on several issues related to the history and sport of boxing in Ghana, such as the reason Ga-Mashie has dominated the sport, the significance of Azumah Nelson to the sport and nation-building, his childhood days, his major fights, and how boxing should be developed.

This study of history and biography establishes a cognate and secondary relationship with the discipline of cultural studies because of its exploration of the popular culture of sports. Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992, 4) viewed cultural studies as:

An interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and sometimes counter-disciplinary field that operates in the tension between its tendencies to embrace both a broad, anthropological and more narrowly humanistic conception of culture ... It is typically interpretative and evaluative in its methodologies, but unlike traditional humanism it rejects the exclusive equation of culture with high culture and argues that all forms of cultural production need to be studied in relation to other cultural practices and to social and historical structures.

Cultural studies is thus committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices.

Consequently, this work of historical enquiry, without abandoning its place in the discipline of history, moderately draws insights and ideas from sociological theories and cultural studies. This has given it an interdisciplinary character.

Organisation of the book

The flow of the analytical narrative in this publication unfolds in eight thematically ordered chapters. Although chronology is addressed, especially in the biographical aspect of the study, the thematic approach has generally conditioned the organisation of this publication. This is due to the lack of an existing chronological foundation on which to build a social and cultural history of boxing in Ghana that intellectualises the biography of Azumah Nelson and reviews the historical antecedents and transformations of boxing from the classical world of Sumeria, Egypt, Greece and Rome, to eighteenth-century England, and its manifestation in colonial Gold Coast and the indigenous Ga-Mashie community.

This chapter, 'Sports and modern boxing', has introduced the subject matter of this book. It has discussed the multifaceted meanings and uses of sports in pre-modern and modern Western and non-Western societies and reviewed both benign and uncomplimentary views that social scientists have ascribed to them. For example, it has identified the role of sports in hegemony and social control in the history of Imperial Rome and British colonial aggrandisement. However, sports have also been discussed as a fomentor of both good health as well as social and group solidarity. Boxing, an old sport, has been at the centre of the discussion. The religious, economic, political, health and propagandist uses of boxing have been examined in the contexts of theory and history. Additionally, modern boxing has been interrogated as a multicultural phenomenon, even though England was instrumental in its Anglicisation and internationalisation. Furthermore, this chapter has introduced the view that Ghanaian boxing, moulded in the English style, evolved from foreign (English) and local creativity in Gold Coast. The Ga-Mashie community was the first to adopt and reconfigure it into its indigenous fisticuff universe.

Chapter 2, 'Roots of modern boxing in Ghana', shows that the introduction of English-style boxing into colonial Gold Coast was part of colonial cultural imperialism. However, its assimilation by the Ga-Mashie of the Ga ethnic group in the colonial capital of Accra emerges from the historical indigenous fisticuff sport called *asafo atwele*, which was banned by the colonial regime in the 1930s because it was perceived as 'violent'. The existing pugilistic habitus of the Ga-Mashie therefore made it easy for them to adopt a foreign style, which the agency of colonialism



imposed. The chapter reviews its amateur and professional manifestations and development under the aegis of the colonial and post-colonial governments. Declaring Ga-Mashie as a factory of fabled boxers of Ghana, the chapter mentions Azumah Nelson as the best of all time. His legendary image as a world-class fighter and pioneer continental African member of the International Boxing Hall of Fame looms large in Ghanaian, African and international iconographies of sports. The chapter argues that sportspersons like him contribute to the making of Ghana's popular culture and history. He is indubitably worth a historical study.

'Origins? I am the son of my people' is the title of Chapter 3, which initiates the biographical dimension of the study. It traces Azumah Nelson's antecedents from the slums of Ga-Mashie and unveils his lesser-known Afro-Brazilian ancestry through Tabon, a community that African returnees from colonial Brazil established in Accra during the nineteenth century. A triad of factors – harsh economic conditions during his childhood, stimulation from the pugilistic culture and disposition of his community, and inspiration from the heroic stories and roles of pioneer boxers, especially Roy Ankrah and Attuquaye Clottey of Ga-Mashie – ultimately compelled him to make a career of his hobby – boxing. Expecting to obtain fame, financial rewards and an accentuated identity as a Ga-Mashie, he spent about 19 years of his life in the art, amateur sport and professional career of boxing. Between 1980 and 1984, he was the Ghanaian, African and Commonwealth featherweight champion, respectively. This journey of determination made him a national hero and an international boxing legend. He became a protégé of some officers and national politicians in the government of Ghana, and eventually, with their assistance, he gravitated towards and clinched a WBC world title.

Chapter 4, 'The rise of the Azumah legend: The early years', illuminates the social, cultural and economic factors that compelled Azumah Nelson to box. It explores his introduction into professionalism, his major fights and victories, his maturity at that level, his failures and difficulties, and his secrets of success in the ring. The chapter also examines how some key officers and national politicians in the government of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) assisted him as a protégé to clinch the WBC featherweight title from Wilfredo Gomez in 1984 in Puerto Rico. The chapter argues that professional boxing revealed the champion and legend in him to the world. But how did he become that legend in the precarious world of professional boxing? This section posits that apart from his boxing skills, his strong sense of determination, self-discipline, belief that a higher force/power called God was driving him to success, support from the government of the PNDC, and conviction that his victories were for Ghana and African pride, gave him the fortitude, mental energy and confidence to excel as a champion professional boxer. It traces how he fared as the WBC featherweight champion from 1984 to 1988.

Chapter 5 bears the title ‘The legend continues: The glory years’. It explains Azumah Nelson’s successful graduation in 1988 to the WBC super-featherweight (junior-lightweight) division as champion. This chapter also interrogates his interesting but scandal-filled reign as a super-featherweight champion, revealing many of the obstacles and disappointments he encountered in his professional boxing. It examines how he survived two scandals in his career that could have tainted his reputation as a good sportsman and stripped him of his championship title belt. The first was a rumour that he was HIV positive; the second, an accusation that he used some WBC-proscribed drugs to fight. Official investigations, however, revealed that he was neither HIV-positive nor had he ever used drugs to fight. He proceeded to more boxing victories but suffered a defeat in 1990 from Pernell Whitaker when he tried to clinch a title in the lightweight division. Age had caught up with him and he reverted to the super-featherweight division. Younger boxers in that division became hungry for his title.

Chapter 6, which is titled ‘The beginning of the end: Retirement’, discusses what happened when Azumah Nelson reverted to the super-featherweight division and, perhaps overstaying his pugilistic career, continued precariously as *Rex* (king) over title-coveting younger fighters. It was one of these fighters, Genaro Hernandez, who unseated him as ‘Rex of the super-featherweights’. This chapter examines the forces that finally made him retire and hang up his gloves. It also provides a review of his boxing brilliance.

Chapter 7, ‘More than just pain and passion: Azumah Nelson’s out-of-the-ring life’, examines Azumah Nelson as a father, philanthropist, entrepreneur-employer, national and continental diplomat, social activist and environmentalist who has given an abundance of support to society. It reveals his view on boxing as a sport that can give ‘self’-possession to people such as himself, even though it can dispossess people of it. Muhammad Ali, for example, was allowed self-possession by boxing, but his ‘over-boxing’ led to a situation where he was dispossessed of himself and reduced to suffering from symptoms associated with Parkinsonism or *dementia pugilistica* (DP). However, drawing on the example of how Azumah Nelson and his own Ga-Mashie creatively employed boxing for cultural and economic empowerment, the chapter argues that through time and the development of societies, sports, including boxing, have had multiple meanings because ‘organised sports were implicated in processes of social development ... structure of family life, socialisation and education, identity formation and government policy, commodification and the economy, and globalisation and the media’ (Coakley and Lever 2000, 2985). Chapter 8 constitutes my conclusions.

The chapters in this book provide a chronological-cum-thematic narrative about the conceptual and historical meaning and roles of sports and boxing as international



cultural commodities. The storyline elucidates the development of organised boxing in Ghana, and boxing's overt and inner social meaning(s) and value(s) within the colonial and postcolonial (contemporary) sociocultural settings of Ghana. Furthermore, the chapters weave a narrative that provides a comprehension of Azumah Nelson's life, the social significance of his boxing career and legend, and the cultural and economic ramifications of his out-of-the-ring life as a social person and activist, and as a national hero. This book also offers insights into specific socialisation patterns, including the realms of such constructions as class, gender, religion and race, which conditioned the legend's fighting spirit and success in boxing.

In the next chapter I discuss the history of the evolution of modern boxing in colonial Gold Coast, the place of the Ga-Mashie community in that development, and the growth of the sport in self-ruled Ghana.

Notes

- 1 'Modern', in this context, is the period from the Age of Enlightenment in Europe and the Europe-spawned cultural ideas, motifs and philosophies that followed that period and which, on the wings of European imperialism and colonialism, were planted in territories outside Europe that became subject territories of European nations. There is little consensus on when to date the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment. In this work, the 'modern' era starts from the middle of the seventeenth century. Modern boxing then refers to the sport of boxing which, having started and flourished as bare-knuckle pugilism in post-Civil War England, developed into English-style boxing and, through the agency of colonialism, spread to the colonial territories of England, such as Gold Coast and, consequently, drawing on some non-English ideas, became a globalised commodity. Thus, the present construct or sport of boxing in Ghana is 'modern'.
- 2 Play is a voluntary action or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is 'different' from 'ordinary' life (Huizinga 1949, 28). 'It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it.... It [can] promote the formation of social groupings, which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means' (Huizinga 1955, 13).
- 3 Game is a sub-class of play. It is any form of playful competition whose outcome is determined by physical skill, strategy or chance employed singly or in combination (Caillois 1961; Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1951).
- 4 Sports as physical activities, in this context, are specialised types of challenging games. Therefore, a sport, as one of the many 'sports' organised, institutionalised or otherwise, taken up by individuals, as challenging pursuits to test themselves, or by groups or teams who compete against each other, is deemed a real unique kind of game event or action.
- 5 Pelé received an honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1997.

- 6 See Barton (1919, 1969); Beaglehole and Beaglehole (1938); and Temple (1922 cited in Briffault 1927, 97) for how sports settled Ifugao disputes, ushered Pukapuka boys into adulthood and arranged Dukawa marriages respectively. Sports provided cathartic, ritualistic and devotional religious services to the ancient Greeks. See Glubok and Tamarin (1976, 9–10 and 11–12).
- 7 For an interesting argument about whether sports are of artistic and aesthetic value, see Arnold (1990, 160–179).
- 8 She was a film expert commissioned by Hitler to make propaganda films for the Nazi regime.
- 9 *Pankration* originates from the Greek words pan (all) and kratos (strength, might, power). Literally meaning ‘all of the might’, the combat blended extreme elements of wrestling and boxing. Gouging out eyes, kicking, biting, strangling, twisting arms and jumping on downed adversaries were not allowed. The engagement continued until one contestant was knocked out, or writhed in agony on the ground, unable to stand to continue fighting.
- 10 On the question of the role of sports in the cultural imperialist enterprise of the British, see Mangan (1986).
- 11 Some sports analysts differentiate between pugilism and boxing. The former is deemed crude and less scientific. From Broughton’s time onward, boxing became the popular term to describe the sport.
- 12 She is a general and child psychiatrist in the USA who has an interest in interpreting the symbolic play of children and symbols in dreams.
- 13 For example, Gerald Early advocates that professional boxing should be discontinued and amateur boxing, which in his view is more sanely supervised, kept and offered in colleges. See Early (Early, 1995, 328).
- 14 This is the title of a speech that Roosevelt gave before the Hamilton Club in Chicago, Illinois on April 10, 1899 (See Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life: Essays and Addresses*, 1999). Reflecting Roosevelt’s own personality and life experience, the speech preached that the highest success and ultimate triumphs came not to persons who craved easy peace but to those who led the strenuous life by not shrinking from danger, hardship or bitter toil. Failure to embrace strenuous life efforts was an inability to live a meaningful and better life.
- 15 In 1987, the ABU became the African Boxing Confederation (ABC). See ‘ABU. is Now ABC.’ (*PDG*, November 12, 1987, 15).
- 16 Dick Tiger (Richard Ihetu), the Nigerian boxer who pursued his professional boxing career, first, in England and, later, the USA, and retired in 1970, was the first African boxer to be inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame posthumously in 1991. He died in 1971 at the age of 42 years.
- 17 Videos of Azumah Nelson’s fights and interviews, and those of many of the opponents he fought, are on the popular video-sharing website, YouTube.



2

Roots of modern boxing in Ghana

Nothing draws a crowd as quickly as a fight.
Old saying

The emergence and entrenchment of colonialism saw the suppression and/or discontinuity of a number of indigenous sports. European sports – like football and boxing – were introduced and popularised gradually (Vieta 1990, 561). The large European presence in Cape Coast, the first colonial capital, made the town the starting point for football in the country (Goldblatt 2006, 2008). Primarily, the British political establishment used African students in its formal schooling programme to entrench football, from c.1900 (Goldblatt 2006, 2008).

Unlike football, boxing first gained currency among the Ga-Mashie of urban Central Accra, which from 1876 became the colonial capital. It later spread to other parts of the country. Ga-Mashie's boxers have generally dominated the sport and produced many champions in and for Ghana.

Ga-Mashie and its assimilation of English-style boxing, c.1600 to c.1930s

Historically, Ga-Mashie society had an indigenous fisticuff sport called *asafo atwele*, which largely facilitated their easy participation in and adoption of the foreign style of boxing. Akyeampong's seminal study reveals that burgeoning violent urban politics, prevailing in the colonial capital, contributed to the evolution of *asafo atwele* (Akyeampong 2002).

As the capital, Accra experienced a massive influx of immigrants and an intense population density, which yielded the attendant problem of social competition for survival and control of resources. Furthermore, as colonial capitalism spread and intensified in the capital, certain clashes of interest occurred between indigenous political leaders and the aggrieved masses, and between leaders of the indigenous

polity and colonial administrators. The capitalist colonial administration's desire to transform Accra into an ideal 'modern' city required that land of the indigenous population should be taken or obtained through the indigenous aristocracy. This appropriation of land for real estate escalated land litigation problems between indigenous custodians and private entrepreneurs associated with the colonial administrators. Often chiefs were implicated in the illegal sale of land (Sackeyfio 2008; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014). Consequently, chieftaincy rivalry and cases of violence-associated destoolments of chiefs became rife. Confronted by the wave of immigrants, land appropriation, and prevalence of urban squalor, the Ga-Mashie commoners appeared to be a depressed minority being dispossessed of land and space (Akyeampong 2002, Sackeyfio 2008). The common 'illegal' sale of land by chiefs alienated most them from the masses (Sackeyfio 2008; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014). This polarised the indigenous regal leadership positions and the masses (commoners)-oriented civic work-vigilante-military companies of the *asafo* (pl. *asafoi*).

The *asafo* companies looked like broad age grades. Each straddled a number of different indigenous quarters or *akutsei* (sing. *akutso*). Every Ga-Mashie male and female had to be initiated as a warrior – *tabilo* (pl. *tabiloi*) – into their father's *asafo* because the Ga society generally inherited patrilineally. They joined the contingents of their own lineage and moved with the leaders of their individual *akutso* whenever the Ga-Mashie state went to war (see Parker 1995, 27–28; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014). The *asafo* contained a series of hierarchical command offices. There was the *akwashontse*, who theoretically was the senior military commander for Ga-Mashie. This official was historically provided by the Kpakpatse lineage (*we*) of the Asere *akutso*. The *shipi* (military commanders) marshalled their sections of town and spread instructions from the *akwashontse* (Parker, 1995, 28). The *asafoatsemei* and *asafoanyemei* (male and female prefects respectively) headed sections of the companies in each *akutso* (Sackeyfio 2008; Godwin Nii Dzani Kotey, pers. comm., February 19, 2009; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014, 28–29).

Within the realms of town politics, the collective bulk of 'chiefs', that is, the *mantsemei* (sing. *mantse*) and royals constituted the higher echelon. The *asafobii* (members of the *asafoi*) formed the base. The *asafo* was the institutional expression of the interests of the 'ordinary' people. The *asafoi* were thus obliged to diligently defend the rights of the ordinary *manbii* (townspeople, citizens) and *oblahii* (young men, nontitled 'commoners'), regulate the privileges of chiefs and *oblemponmei* (rich/wealthy men who were often honorary stools [regal status] holders), and stop them from abusing their advantaged positions (Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014, 29).

Nevertheless, Kimble revealed in his detailed work on Gold Coast that, between 1913 and 1919, the *asafo*, which was a regulator of society, became an unsettling influence on the institution of chieftaincy (Kimble 1963, 469–472). Kimble seemed,



however, to suggest that the companies became redundant at a certain (unspecified) period. However, as an enduring part of the indigenous social and political landscape, the institution it appears started to re-emerge strongly (by unidentified persons), particularly from 1913, to provide a valve for popular dissatisfaction with the socio-political order (Kimble 1963, 469–472). Customarily, the Ga *asafobii* therefore expected their *mantsemei* to provide leadership and protect what they perceived to be the socioeconomic and political interest of the people.

When Accra became the capital, British political pressure increased on the *mantsemei* to co-operate in their colonial ventures. Most indigenous ‘rulers’ became prey to capitalist and corrupt tendencies of the urbanisation process. The *asafoi* and their leadership then emerged at the forefront to oppose policies and actions of the rulers which they considered inimical to the people’s interests (Sackeyfio 2008; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014). Echoing Kimble, Parker suggested that like their Akan counterparts in states like Akyem Abuakwa and Kwawu, the *asafoi* in Accra functioned as a vehicle for raising ‘youngman’ grievances (Parker 1995, 316–317). Such ‘young men’ generally were the virile youth. However, Parker’s ‘young men’ seemed to designate a category that included the above normative and a cluster of educated, wealthy, and therefore persuasive men. As bastions of ‘tradition’ and political action in a rapidly expanding and ‘modern’ fringe, they could co-opt the *asafoi* establishment and unite popular anger against the *mantsemei* and aristocracy if they alienated the ordinary citizens and mortgaged the common property, customs, and interests of the public. The feasibility of such manipulation contributed to and made it possible for such elements, embroiled in the Ratepayers and Manbii Party struggles of the 1920s to the 1940s, to co-opt the *asafoi* and their support to animate their political rivalry and physical clashes (Akyeampong 2002).

Indigenous leadership was put to the test when Accra became the capital. Chiefs vied with one another for wealth, authority and recognition within the budding capitalist commercial space. Consequently, the sanctity of leadership seemed to wane within a soaring urban politics of bickering and intrigue. European commerce, railways and roads to serve a motor vehicle culture unleashed some undesired consequences on commoner economics (Akyeampong 2002). These included the deprivation of Ga market women and labourers of their livelihoods as traders and carriers respectively (Fortescue 1990, 348–374). The commoners naturally reacted. The politically and economically endangered labouring masses, comprising mostly *asafobii*, found a means to create solidarity, internal cohesion and security. The commoners initiated the martial sport of *asafoi atwele* to inject social cohesion within their ranks. Furthermore, the common citizenry and *asafobii* caucus became protectors of customs and traditions as well as the sanctity of chieftaincy and indigenous Ga-Mashie socio-political identity through ancient martial values and *esprit de corps* of

the Ga *asafo*. Cohesiveness was needed to help that majority to insulate itself and transcend the divisiveness of urban politics and the socioeconomic urban challenges that had affected the Ga-Mashie state. Within this period in the colonial history of Gold Coast, when inter-state warfare involving the *asafo* had ceased, the *asafobii* sought to resurrect the martial essence, vigilantism and communalistic spirit of *asafo* to support social cohesion and order. Thus, the *asafo* did not become useless in this absence of warfare. Unique in *asafo* history, the Ga-Mashie *asafo* channelled their martial energy and spirit into the venture of engendering state security and cohesion, not in the presence of war, but under the threat of divisive urban politics (Akyeampong 2002). The employment of cultural, religious and *asafo* (warrior) symbology became necessary for this quest to restore a balance in the indigenous social and political system. The symbolism and symbolisation of martial greatness, which was imagined in *asafo* martial ethos as unarmed bare-knuckle (*atwele*) fisticuff combat (*nomo*), was invoked. This combat and its symbolism, which glorified the martial qualities of fitness, swiftness and strength, healthy competition, courage and beauty, contributed to the development of *asafo atwele* by the Ga-Mashie *asafobii*. It was part of a plan to salvage Ga-Mashie identity and solve contemporary problems.

The Ga-Mashie state, which was reconstituted around 1730¹ and started as a seaside town (*nshonamajii*) with several adjoining *kose* (countryside settlements) and *aklowai* (villages), descended from an old Ga Chiefdom – Old Accra.² It evolved from the historical dynamics of indigenous state formation and an inter-state political struggle for economic and political hegemony in Gold Coast from about the sixteenth century. Today, the geographical space of indigenous Ga-Mashie, commonly known as Central Accra, lies, metaphorically, as an isle of ‘tradition’ inside an ocean of ‘modernity’ in a virtually boundless cosmopolis in West Africa. It is part of the wider traditional Ga polity and ethnic group.³

The imperial rivalry between the English and Dutch led to the demarcation of Ga-Mashie into two zones where two forts of the European powers were present. The two areas were *Kinka*, also known as Dutch Accra,⁴ which after 1868 became Ussher Town when the British took control of the town and *Nleshi* (*Inleshie*) also known as Jamestown or English Accra. Thus, at the time that Accra became the colonial administrative capital, the Ga-Mashie unit of the wider Ga society existed as two major towns.⁵ The binary demarcation of the Ga-Mashie unit constituted seven indigenous *akutsei* (quarters) or sections (Field 1937, 2). Jamestown contained Sempe, Akanmaje or Akamadze/Akumadze/Akumajen and Inleshie Alata. Ussher Town constituted Gbese, Abola, Otublohum and Asere⁶ (Godwin Nii Dzani Kotey, pers. comm., February 19, 2009; Sackeyfio-Lenoch 2014, 23–25). The social corridors of these zones provided the key space where *asafo atwele* in the twentieth century was organised and rooted.



Created by able-bodied men as a utilitarian marker of social formation, martial qualities, *esprit de corps* and security, *asafo atwele* also received participation from pre-pubescent boys who were not active members of the *asafoi* but were being nurtured into adulthood. Accordingly, it assumed the nature of a civil and non-martial mass sport, normally performed by commoners on the beach and in popular assembly venues within Jamestown and Ussher Town, especially in the sub-quarter of Bukom.

Organised modern boxing started to take firm root from the 1930s, when the British colonial administration banned *asafo atwele* to stem the apparent violence that was associated with that sport. In terms of its employment of the fist and ability to promote and express courage, fitness, strength, tact, group solidarity, recreation, resourcefulness, power and social prestige, modern boxing was similar to *asafo atwele* and hence attractive to the Ga. The proscription sent *asafo atwele* into oblivion and induced the Ga-Mashie, especially the commoners and slum dwellers, to engage in the available alternative – modern boxing.

What was the nature of organised *asafo atwele*? It expressed competitive combat between the various members of the *asafo* companies from the *akutsei*. Competitive but nevertheless individual or group free-for-all solidarity fighting contests were organised by *asafo* leaders for healthy adult males. Combatants fought to honour their *asafo*, quarters, themselves and their families. It was also an alternative way for the youthful *asafo* male combatants to enhance their masculinity and acquire societal recognition and identity as *mokpakpa* ('a man of exemplary life' or 'honourable', 'proper', 'brave' man, or 'man of material substance'). The idea of the 'man of exemplary life', that is the 'honourable' man, which was part of indigenous Ga-Mashie notions of social virtue, represented not only an ideology of material aggrandisement. *Mokpakpa* was also the courageous fighter, whose courage and bravery qualified him as a successful warrior. To have fought as an *asafo* warrior was a vital constituent in the social identity – the status – of the *mokpakpa*. The Danish clergyman Johannes Rask elucidated that concept in the eighteenth century, noting that 'in the olden days', even though the guideline was not firmly applied and enforced during the time that he was reporting, a Ga man could only become headman or 'kabuseer' (also spelled as caboceer)⁷ (*mokpakpa*) if he had participated in a war or killed a range of wild animals (Rask 2009, 168–169; Quaye 1972, 256–257). Indigenous Ga-Mashie therefore venerated courageous fighters and excellent combatants in martial duels. Because ambitious young males could not participate in organised inter and intra-ethnic warfare, since warfare was proscribed within the colonial milieu of *Pax Britannia* in Accra, *asafo atwele* became an alternative for them to demonstrate valued warrior qualities to attempt to acquire the status of *mokpakpa*. Although females of the *asafoi* customarily performed certain military roles in society, they were forbidden to participate in the sport as combatants. Generally, female participation in the

actions of the *asafo* was limited by some practical considerations during war and by taboos in times of peace and war. For example, a woman's participation in the deeds of her *asafo* was, as a rule in the Ghanaian context, restricted by taboo when she was in her menses, an experience that was deemed contaminating and, if allowed in proximity to them, capable of reducing the effectiveness of 'sacred' objects and *tsofa* or *suman* (spiritual force or talismanic 'medicine' and charm) of the *asafo*. According to Aggrey (1978, 45–46), it is from women that the *asafo* at times get 'something', which is taboo to it (menstrual pollutant), to prepare potent antidote charms against rival companies.

The *asafo* of the Ga society had their women's section under the *asafoanyemei* who, in principle, had supervisory powers and performed leadership functions which were analogous to those of the male captains, the *asafoatsemei*. An all-female singing and dancing section called *adowafoi* also existed. In the indigenous Ga-Mashie setting, during war women were not allowed by their men to engage in combat. They either performed civil chores on the battlefield or undertook rituals at home. For example, contemporary records about some Ga military operations in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and the battle of Katamansu of 1826 show that Ga women only performed auxiliary chores, including singing to praise their male compatriots, performing the *asrayere* ritual war dances and singing outside the battlefield. *Asrayere* is originally from the Akan, translating as 'visiting wives' in the Akan Twi language, because it brought women together to perform to wish their men well in times of war (Nketia 1975, 25). Those Ga women at home performed *asrayere* in which they dramatised the warrior qualities of their fighting male counterparts (Reindorf 1895, 211; Field 1940, 103; Isert in English 1992, 136–137) to boost the morale of fighters and confront and ridicule deserters and cowards. Sometimes, as an exception to the rule, some transcended the mere offering of service and praise and advanced to the battlefield to reload muskets and pick up the weapons of their fallen male counterparts (*African Times* 1866; Arhin 1983, 91–98). Women, according to Field (1969, 12), joined men on military campaigns as carriers of provisions, but occasionally some 'under stress of grief and despair would become possessed and charge into the enemy's lines, terrifying the warriors not only by the horrible ferocity and strength of [their] onslaught, but by the conviction that supernatural powers were driving [them].' Although Ga women, in general, are largely absent from accounts of precolonial military conflict, it is apparent, however, drawing on the illustrations of Isert, Reindorf and Field, that their role in wartime surpassed the mere provision of service and praise. Through their supplication to deities and ritualised actions, they expressed their indigenous 'right' to contribute to combat and the martial culture of *asafo*. It would be reasonable to suggest that the patrilineal and seeming androcratic Ga society⁸ possibly restricted women's direct participation in



military combat as physical combatants for the utilitarian reason that no society and *asafo* would want to risk their extinction by consciously sending their ‘mothers and sisters’ to the battlefield to be annihilated or maimed. Therefore, even if *asafo* women were capable of fighting, as the nurturers of society and not being as physically as robust as men, they were customarily restricted and protected from participating in all martial activities that were physically violent, brutal and prone to resulting in injury and death. It is for such reasons that the in Ga-Mashie were excluded from *asafo atwele*. Females were thus disenfranchised in such a sport

because it was not considered proper for females, considering their [physiological and anatomical] composition, to partake in that precarious male-dominated fisticuff sport. They were only allowed to observe the engagements, use uncomplimentary words to taunt the adversaries of their favourites, cheer their favourites, naturally those who were members of their *asafo*, and encourage them to fight. (Godwin Nii Dzani Kotey, pers. comm., February 19, 2009)

This exclusion of women would continue and prevail within the context of English-style modern boxing when it developed in Gold Coast and Ghana. With its establishment, modern boxing for a long time remained an exclusive male domain in the country. It was only during the 1990s that national formal experimentation with organised female boxing was conducted in Ghana. Although internationally, women’s boxing ceremonially debuted at the Olympic Games in 1904, international women’s boxing only began to rise to prominence from the 1990s. Interestingly, Ghana’s experimental enterprise of female boxing started in the vicinity of Bukom in the Ga-Mashie area with Ga females such as Yakor Chavez, alias First Lady of Boxing,⁹ Amerley Turkson and Gifty Tiger, who were familiar with boxing in Central Accra. However, compared to male boxing, female boxing lacked popularity and exposure. It could not insert itself strongly as a recognised activity in the prevailing popular culture of sports in the country. This might be attributed to the fact that in its nascency, it naturally confronted the theory of female frailty in a society filled with stereotypes that commonly categorised professions as either ‘men’s work’ or ‘women’s work’ or because most people did not believe and still do not believe they would find in it the same calibre as men’s boxing. Thus, because of the prevalent general indigenous cultural perception that boxing was a manly and ‘dangerous’ sport for women, women’s boxing did not receive popular reception and encouragement in the country. It has therefore remained in a virtually comatose state in Ghana (Rashidi Williams, pers. comm., February 20, 2009).

Originally, *asafo atwele* had sociological importance. It was cathartic, since it initially directed the energies of a disgruntled commoner rank, which could have disrupted social serenity, into sports. Furthermore, through its invocation of the qualities of courage and strength, it helped to revitalise and reinforce societal trust

in the *asafo* as a vibrant indigenous social formation that was strong and capable of providing security, order and justice in and to the Ga-Mashie society. Although the pugilistic contests appeared to be inter-company rivalry, the combats, in the true spirit of sports, promoted camaraderie among the *asafo* and the sections from where they came, thereby helping to minimise actual conflicts between those elements. The sport became a marker of social prestige and popularity because strong contestants and renowned group champions were praised by their communities, *asafo* and society as a whole.

Physical strength and fitness were important qualities of manhood within the indigenous locale. *Asafo atwele* fighting became a way of exhibiting such manhood. Unarmed fighting therefore became an integral part of Ga-Mashie culture and the hard-bodied, swift, nimble-footed, fast-handed, and taut, well-carved muscled men became epitomes of enhanced beauty and masculinity. These bodily characteristics were not only aesthetic to the local perception of the masculine body. The active, fast and muscled man was also deemed hardworking, and such recognition was prestigious since laziness was frowned upon in that social milieu. The body of the Ga-Mashie male, in that context, had to be conditioned to be active and strong to fight and also work hard. Unarmed combat was thus an acceptable way to ensure the development of physical fitness and beauty, courage, and social solidarity. Pugilistic duels and contests became acceptable tools for settling grudges between disagreeing people. Noticeably, social survival, recreation and standards for masculine bodily beauty within the context of the *asafo atwele*-conditioned Ga-Mashie locale came to be defined with fights and strong bodies.

Godwin Dzani Kotey, chairperson of the United Boxing Coaches Association of Ghana and an indigene of Atukpai (Otukpai) in the Gbese *akutso*, explained in a personal interview in February 2009 that fighting (*Nomo*) and the development of a fighting culture, based on pugilistic constructions, and the notion of a strong and fast body as representative of beauty among the Ga-[Mashie] epitomised recreation and aesthetics. They were 'products of the legal tradition of the *asafo* pugilistic contests and bare-knuckle fights, which had made fighting to appear as a source of recreation'. He explained further:

The [intra]-Akutso and inter-asafo challenges of the seven akutsei, which normally took place on Tuesdays, and at other times Saturdays and Sundays, were constructions for social recreation. The Ga people do not go fishing on Tuesdays. Net mending and swimming took a considerable portion of the day. In the afternoon, planned and/or spontaneous fights between groups took place, primarily, on the beaches. Winners and champions were applauded, and the losers were encouraged. The first quarter of the twentieth century also witnessed these competitions taking place mostly on Sundays, or any of the days mentioned earlier, on which fights occurred. After communal swimming



by elements from the two parts of Ga-Mashie, it was very common to hear one person, representing one of the towns or sections, with the fists raised upwards hollering *Odododiodio*, which was a call for a pugilistic challenge from the members of the other town or sections. In acceptance of the challenge, the response *ooo aiee* was hollered back. After such [ritualistic antiphonic] calls had been made on behalf of members of the sections, the swimmers grouped themselves into their respective *asafoi*. Series of verbal sparring [and some brow-beating techniques] to put fear into the opponents and paralyse their fighting energy were demonstrated. The fights, which manifested according to age groups, with the minimum age for participation being 12 years, then began after such demonstrations, which commonly featured trembling bodies and shaking fists, signifying that bodies and fists had been invigorated by supernatural powers and *tsafa* or had been possessed and become strengthened by their deities.

Asafo atwele mainly involved the use of the fist (*atwele*) to hit (*kala*, pronounced as *kla*) or deliver rapid punches called *kalamo* (pronounced as *klamo*) at one's opponent(s). It also had a variant which, like *Muay Thai* (kick boxing), accommodated the use of the legs to dispense foot kicks and stamps called *ntia* or 'to step' (*naa mo*) at one's contender. The sport would usually start at the beach, which was a convenient venue because it was spacious and the sand cushioned fighters if they were downed. The combats sometimes ended there but normally they climaxed at public centres of assembly in town. The tradition of *asafo atwele*, which emphasised swiftness, courage, physical fitness, and mastery of strong and effective punching through *kla*, prepared Ga fighters physically for the English-style modern boxing when it took root in Accra. Godwin Dzani Kotey continued:

After fighting for some time between thirty to sixty minutes, the fighting groups would, on the instruction of the captains, leave the beach and continue in town, which normally featured the fights of able-bodied men of over eighteen years. The fights, [in the glare of cheering spectators], continued and ended at local venues and squares ... commonly in the Bukom Square area¹⁰ in Asere akutso where most of the people were illiterate fisher folks.

Bukom, where eventually modern boxing took strong root, indubitably was the hub for *asafo atwele* engagements in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Historically, the convergence of mass congregations and rallies of citizens to engender consultation, consensus and political action on matters of national socio-political interest in Ga-Mashie mainly took place on the sacred sites of Sakumotsoshishi, where the powerful deity Sakumo dwells, Mojawe (literally 'house of blood'), the site of the supreme court of the Ga mantse and *mantsemei*, and Amugina (translated as 'forecourt of Amugi'), the hallowed piece of land where the sanctuary of a venerated ancient tutelary Ga deity is located. Urbanisation and population growth in Accra demanded

that new spacious sites should be found in Ga-Mashie (Central Accra) for popular assembly, secular national congregation and democratic discussion of national issues. Two purely secular and bigger spaces were added to the three traditional sites in the early years of the colonial period. The Akoto-Lamptey (Lante) Square was the first to be added, and Bukom Square in the *akutso* of the *akwashontse* followed in 1910. In addition to the spaciousness of Bukom Square, the location of the office of the high military commander in Asere *akutso*, which therefore made it a centre of military importance and *asafo* activities, contributed in making Bukom an important centre for the pursuit and practice of the martial sport of *asafo atwele*.

Asafo atwele combats, venue and assembly facilitated socialisation for both spectators and contestants. Victorious groups sang and danced. If a group conceded defeat without first retreating, since at times some group members took to premature retreats by fleeing, all the combating groups would congratulate one another and plan to compete again on another day. Noteworthy, the sport, 'pulled women spectators, and helped bachelors and combatants searching for wives to attract, from the congregation, female admirers and suitors who, within the Ga-Mashie social milieu, desired strong men' (Kotey 2009). Kotey added:

Apart from showing 'manly' courage and [martial] valour, and making one's body beautiful, strong and desirable, fighting of *asafo atwele* sport, [allowed] men to show that they were strong and could provide security to their lovers, wives, themselves, and families. The evenings saw the playing of drums, and the 'Agbe' drumming, accompanied with singing and dancing.¹¹

Thus, according to Kotey, weaponless hand-to-hand fighting, 'for the majority [of people], was considered and gained social acceptance as a normal activity to take place in society'. Furthermore, 'We [the Ga] fight to settle scores, entertain ourselves, create the spirit and image of 'macho' [*machismo*], acquire and enhance social prestige and fame and to forge groups and inter-personal solidarity'.

This traditional notion, which underpinned *asafo atwele*, is still prevalent:

It is even borne by children ... out there [the various neighbourhoods in Jamestown and Ussher Town] ... Take a stroll through ... Havana, Adedemkpo, Jamestown, Agbado, Mudor and Swalaba. ... Explore the Odododiodio constituency¹² in general, or go to Bukom, it is 3:30pm, the kids have returned from school, they are hungry and trying to get food, some are on the beach waiting to get a share of the catch [fish]. Within these settings of social interaction, I can bet you that you would see street and beach fights. The fighters, as long as they use their fists would not be separated until one concedes defeat. That would end their misunderstanding. (Kotey 2009)

Furthermore, Kotey explained that:



Fighting, with the fist, forms an integral part of our culture. [The] *asafo*, [and its martial ethos], promoted [and mortised] it into the cultural environment of indigenous Accra. [M]ost Ga elements within [the precincts of] the Ga-Mashie traditional area, therefore, have, consciously or unconsciously, continuously cultivated and [nurtured] a fighting spirit. (Kotey 2009)

The bloodied faces and the attendant injuries that accompanied *asafo atwele* no doubt made it seem violent. However, in its unadulterated form as a cultural construction, it was accepted by its originators, who saw utilitarian and functional values in it. The English colonial administration overlooked its original sporting essence and values, deemed it negative and vicious, and consequently banned it. This was particularly during a period when urban rival politicians within the local colonial government politics ‘hijacked’ the sport and its participants to promote political violence and intimidation to support their political ambitions. If the issue was about the settling of disputes, then, in the perspective of the colonial administration, which needed social order for its selfish goal of governing, there were other ‘legal’ and ‘non-violent’ ways, including the use of the police and colonial law courts, for such a goal.

The customary commoner cultural appetite for the psycho-physical values of fisticuff sports persisted in the Ga-Mashie cultural psyche despite the ban. This proclivity easily directed (and still directs) many of the Ga-Mashie elements to strongly affiliate with and participate in modern boxing. Kotey commented:

Logical[ly] the strong pugilistic cultural background of Ga-Mashie, and the fact that, in collective terms, the Ga were the first group in the country to have been introduced to modern boxing, which they adopted with all seriousness, have largely contributed to their historical and contemporary dominance of the sport in the country. (Kotey 2009)

It has been noted that *asafo atwele* generally led the ordinary Ga classes and masses to appreciate strong male bodies used for hard work as beautiful in Ga-Mashie. Within such an environment, the ideal masculine body was conditioned for hard work and, moreover, enhanced, maintained and displayed by tough combat-like sports. Theoretically, the prioritising of such a body must have been a guiding principle for the development of a characteristic Ga-[Mashie] pugilistic *habitus* which extended into modern boxing, another combat sport which valued strong, hard, muscular or taut bodies as symbols of beauty and manhood. As Kotey puts it:

For us [the Ga], fighting (*nomo*), which includes wrestling (*abotri*), but especially bare-fist fighting (*atwele*), is a natural and martial culture thing. Akotoku, [the Ga nomenclature for modern boxing, which [accommodates the] use [of] ‘cushioned’ gloves, and evolved from the Ga word *kotoku*,¹³ has also become a way of life for us. [These fighting constructs] have formed part of us. There is nothing wrong with them, especially akotoku. [They] are beautiful and

showcase intelligence and skill, as one, by the use of skill and force, is able to subdue another in rivalry and friendship at the same time. They have been used for survival, friendship, settling disputes, encouraging bravery, and displaying and enhancing personal bodily beauty. Unarmed fist combats and boxing ... form part of our cultural heritage. Asafo atwele instilled it. Our ancestors liked it. We are ... continuing tradition and living that character in us, as we still accommodate fisticuff fights as normal and modern boxing as enjoyable and pleasant. [In] boxing, we, represented by the numerous Ga boxers of yesteryear and presently, only have lived a Ga culture, [spawned] by Ga-Mashie, through a borrowed 'thing'. [W]e live our ancient fighting tradition today. We naturally gravitate to boxing, which is a fighting and combat sport. (Kotey 2009)

Evidently, both the historical and the prevailing Ga affinity for and massive interest and participation in modern boxing are derived immediately from *asafo atwele*. I believe that within this theoretical framework and historical estimation of the Ga-Mashie history of *asafo atwele* most of the boxing greats of the Ga, primarily those from Ga-Mashie's Bukom, gravitated to modern boxing because of a commoner psychological constitution and social perception which determined their *habitus* for participation in that energy-driven and strong-body sport. Azumah Nelson's participation in modern boxing was therefore produced by that prevalent *habitus*.

Asafo atwele yielded to organised modern boxing in the 1930s in the turbulent urban politics of Central Accra. As observed by Akyeampong (2002), the settling, in 1927, of a long-standing feud between Jamestown and Ussher Town had an impact on *asafo atwele*. Regal struggles for political premiership in Accra, heightened by the Indirect Rule system, and litigation over lands were mainly responsible for the feud. Jamestown even declared autonomy from Ussher Town and the Ga mantse, that is, the senior office-holder in the Ga polity – the Ga paramount chief. Before 1927, regal authorities of those towns occasionally employed *asafo atwele* contests to test each other's *asafo* strength and capabilities. After the reunion, *asafo atwele* continued as a purposive sport to create friendships and *esprit de corps* among the *asafo* groups and the general commoner sections of the two towns which comprised largely artisans, traders and fishers. It assisted in pacifying political emotions and misgivings that had intensified within elements of the two towns. Consequently, it became more organised as a mass sport and the fishermen's guild was particularly noted for producing some of the best fighters. Nevertheless, some formal school 'educated' – literate – political elements endeavoured to use the fighters and their skills to achieve political goals during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Such politicians seized the sport and redirected its cultural course by recruiting groups of fighters into their respective political camps to intimidate and use force against their political challengers. The chaos and disturbance of social order that followed the redirection caught the attention of the colonial administration, which used the situation as



an excuse to outlaw *asafo atwele*. The administration capitalised on that excuse to encourage and promote its own cultural construction of organised modern boxing to replace *asafo atwele*. Through this process, the regime accelerated the formal extension and rooting of a British cultural motif into Gold Coast and postcolonial Ghana.

The turbulent urban politics of Accra intensified as the 'educated' elites and colonial administration became highly antagonistic of one another, partly due to the economic depression which started in 1929.¹⁴ The economic stress, which caused low international prices for cocoa, one of the key exports of Gold Coast, sparked local opposition in the forms of cocoa hold-ups and a boycott of European goods. The uneasy political relationship between the local nationalists, constituting the chiefs and 'educated' elites on one hand and the colonial administrators on the other, further disintegrated. However, the local nationalists were not strongly united in their struggle. They were divided into the pro-traditional authority group of the Aborigines Right Protection Society (ARPS) and the pro-'educated' elite group of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA). Each group wanted to be ahead of the other in the nationalist pursuit of political leverage. The chiefs wanted to lead and represent the people. They saw themselves as 'natural' leaders of the indigenous authority structure, a perception which the colonial regime strengthened when, through the Native Administrative Ordinance (1927), it endorsed the chiefs as the major conduits of colonial governance in the Lord Lugard-spawned Indirect Rule system. The 'educated' elites thought differently. They reasoned that their economic power and their status as 'formally educated' professionals qualified them to have greater participation, if not to assume the role of leading the people, in matters affecting their political, social, and economic well-being within the colonial setting. Accra was brought into this contest as its indigenous, but urban-related politics was divided along the interests and ideological lines of these rival national groups.

Within the context of Accra's Municipal elections of the mid 1920s, which provided opportunities for representatives of the people to sit in the Legislative Assembly, two competing parties spearheaded by nationalist politicians soliciting for the franchise of the people emerged. These were the populist commoner-oriented [Ga] Manbii (Ga Citizens or People) Party and the elitist Ratepayers Association, led by the radical lawyer A.W. Kojo Thompson (Quarcoopome 1991, 11–21) and Dr F.V. Nanka Bruce (OBE), respectively. The former appeared to be 'people'-oriented, chief-centred and was pro-ARPS, whereas the latter derived support from the elitist NCBWA. Because the franchise was not based on universal suffrage, the Ratepayers Association dominated the elections of the time from 1927 to 1934. This was because many supporters of the Manbii Party could not vote within the prevailing franchise system of the Municipality because they were poor and not ratepayers. Within this ferment of an apparent class struggle – commoners against

bourgeoisie elites – which operated within the politically tense and charged urban space of Accra, with the flashpoints being the Ussher Town stronghold of the Manbii Party and the Jamestown stronghold of the Ratepayers, the struggling Manbii Party strongly contested the Ratepayers for political weight. Through the organisational help, campaigning and media propaganda support from two radical West African masses-inclined politicians – Nnamdi Azikiwe from Nigeria, who was editor of the *African Morning Post*, and the Russian-trained communist and Pan Africanist I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson from Sierra Leone – Thompson's Manbii Party won the 1935 elections (Quarcoo 1991, 16–17).

Within this competitive political atmosphere, it became common for supporters of the parties to clash and, through linguistic fencing and songs, insult one another. Such clashes also manifested in violent physical forms. Political antics and displays in pursuance of political campaign and power materialised and it was within that framework that the belligerent politicians decided to employ *asafo atwele* contests and fighters to promote their political rivalry, within the sphere of sports and violent confrontations of politics-inspired thuggery (Akyeampong 2002). Their employees and their art became tools for engendering and stoking turbulent urban political rivalry and violent clashes. Existing *asafo atwele* groups, and newly organised ones, mainly constituting combatants handpicked from the youth section of the towns, became more structured along rival political lines. On their new trajectory and through the financial and logistical support of their patron nationalist politicians, they contested one another for reasons extraneous to sports and became essentially the fighting wings of rival parties. Hence, the *asafo* sport in Ga-Mashie became an instrument in the search for real and symbolic political power and anteriority by nationalist politicians. Whether contesting each other in the name of sport and leisure or as fighting wings of political patrons, *asafo atwele* groups now did so largely as partisan factions. An interesting feature of this new arrangement was the provision of uniforms, by patrons, in the form of casual shorts with unique colours for each *asafo atwele* group. In these coloured shorts the combatants asserted community identities and political inclinations as they contested and bloodied each other overtly in the character of sport and covertly in the spirit of a prevailing competitive partisan politics. Its acquired character as a 'violent' political tool for partisan interests and agendas compelled the colonial authority to doubt its sporting quality. The violence, maiming and political thuggery that came at the behest of 'educated' and radical nationalist politicians, especially those leading the electioneering campaigns which culminated in the election of the Manbii Party in 1935, revealed to the colonial administration how it could threaten social security, order and peace in Accra and the colonial territory. The government deemed it a decadent and undesirable form of leisure. Consequently, banning it around 1935, the colonial administration redirected



the skills and energy of the participants and pugilistic *habitus* of its creators into state-controlled and regulated modern boxing.

Determined to eliminate 'popular' radicalism, which had endorsed the ultra-sport role of *asafo atwele* in municipal politics, the government emasculated Azikiwe and Wallace-Johnson, who were the two main architects of popular radicalism. In 1936, when Wallace-Johnson wrote an article titled 'Has the African a God' in the *African Morning Post*, the government arrested him for sedition and fined him £50 (Adi and Sherwood 2003, 182). He was proclaimed *persona non grata* and deported to Sierra Leone. In 1937, after Azikiwe was acquitted of the charge of sedition, he left for Nigeria.

It must be noted, however, that the idea and practice of modern boxing reached Accra before the ban on *asafo atwele* was enforced. In an embryonic stage, it was pursued within the confines of some academic circles and informal groups of urban dwellers who had had connections with English agents in the country. It was therefore not very popular. After the ban, the government 'mandated' Captain Maxwell Lawford, a Briton, to establish boxing clubs in parts of Accra, including Bukom and Osu. Lawford had been in charge of the printing press and students' boxing club in Achimota College (formerly Prince of Wales College and School founded in 1927) (Williams 1962, 75). The college promoted various European sports for its students, including cricket, hockey, lawn tennis, football, volleyball, athletics, swimming, tennikoit, netball, stoolball and rounders (Agbodeka 1977, 125). By the beginning of the 1930s, it had an exclusive, all-male boxing club (Agbodeka 1977, 125, 'Report on Achimota College, 1930'). The directive given Lawford was intended to bring the lingering fisticuff spirit and skills of *asafo atwele* into those clubs for easy domestication, regulation and monitoring by the government (Akyeampong 2002, 54).

As records on the Ghana Amateur Boxing Association (GABA) reveal, modern boxing was practised privately and informally in Accra through the instrumentality of one expatriate District Commissioner called Williams even before *asafo atwele* was outlawed. Williams, obviously aware of the local pugilistic talents, as early as 1926 initiated modern English-style boxing fights behind his bungalow ('Ghana Amateur Boxing Association', n.d., 1). Commissioner Williams later teamed up with Lt Col. H.W.M. Bamford, a colonial Commissioner of the Police Force, to organise amateur boxing bouts outside Accra in nearby Nsawam's Cadbury and Fry Yard. Ebenezer Sowah Laryea, alias Surpriser Sowah, a famous Gold Coast boxer, disclosed in the *Daily Graphic* (DG)¹⁵ in 1951 that by the second half of the 1920s, modern boxing had informally started in Ga-Mashie (Central Accra) (Sowah [Laryea] 1951, 2).

Surpriser Sowah, who was born in August 1912 in the birthplace of *asafo atwele* (*Spectator* (Sp), September 28, 1996, 15), was a product of that inchoate boxing. He established and managed the Sparta Boxing Gym at Swalaba, Accra, c.1933 (Sp,

September 28, 1996, 15). He was its premier coach and the first boxing trainer of John Theophilus Otoo Ankrah, Jr, alias Roy Ankrah (Sowah 1951, 1). Ankrah, who was born within the Asere Jorshie (Djornshie) Street area of Ussher Town, spent some of his childhood days within Otublohum (Sowah 1951, 1.), and toughened up in Bukom, became the first African to clinch the British Empire's featherweight title in April 1951. According to Sowah, Gold Coast in comparison to other countries was not a boxing country before the early 1920s. Then 'suddenly [in the twenties] a small group of Accra youth formed an amateur boxing club'. Out of that number emerged two enterprising lads whose names live on in the boxing history of the country (Sowah 1951, 1.). They were Seth Odamtten and 'Charleston' Sykes.¹⁶ They and others fought several epic battles in Central Accra, and other youths were thrilled and inspired by the demonstrations of this 'new' sport. Consequently many, wanting to become pugilists, joined, and that is how boxing developed in the colonial territory (Sowah 1951, 1). Surpriser Sowah was one of the inspired youths who joined the sport. He eventually became the featherweight champion of Gold Coast (Sowah 1951, 1). He disclosed in 1996 that he started boxing in his early teens. At age 17, which would have been in 1929, he joined up with two others, possibly Odamtten and Sykes, to chart a career in the burgeoning fashionable fistic sport in Accra (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15).

[Organised modern] boxing, [although prevailing on an informal and small scale alongside asafo atwele] had then barely become a popular sport in Gold Coast, because it had just been introduced [and was being promoted] by men like Edmund Bannerman ([alias] Boss of Tarkwa [Tarqua(h)]). (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15)

This Edmund Bannerman was not the renowned Edmund Bannerman alias Boss of Tarkwa or 'B of T', one of the famous Bannermans¹⁷ whose several public activities in the nineteenth-century Gold Coast provide remarkable and valuable reading today.¹⁸ He perhaps was, if not definitely, a descendant of the real Boss of Tarqua(h) who died at 71 years old in Jamestown on April 19, 1903 (Ephson n.d.).

Surpriser Sowah further added: 'However because of the indigenous fighting that already existed, it [boxing] quickly caught on' (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15). He, (and naturally other youths) 'joined the then only (local) club in Accra – Accra School of Boxing run by [Edmund] Bannerman, Jimmy Wilde, and 'Battling' Kojo, at Akoto Lante (Akoto-Lamptey) [in the Ga-Mashie area]' (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15).

I believe that the 'small group of youths in Accra who formed an amateur boxing club', referenced by Sowah as the sowers of the seed of organised modern boxing, must have constituted two contemporaneous groups. The first constituted 'the handful' that in 1926, when Surpriser Sowah was about 14 years old, were instructed



by Williams behind his bungalow. Perhaps Odamtten was part of them. Sykes and three other boxers, namely 'Battling' Kojo, 'Slammer' Nettey and A. Addo, were part of the group (*Sunday Mirror*, 16 August, 1953). The second included Bannerman, Wilde and Kojo, who eventually established their club at Akoto-Lante. These small informal boxing groups and formal clubs like Bannerman's and later Sowah's Sparta and local fighters staged numerous demonstration fights and contests within and outside Accra. For example, in Nsawam, the popular venues were the Cadbury and Fry Yard and Mikado Cinema (Vieta 1990, 564). According to Surpriser Sowah, members of the Sparta Club travelled and 'toured the provinces to Kumasi, Sekondi, Kibi, Koforidua and Nsawam'. 'In fact, everywhere that people wanted boxers to appear we appeared and fought' (Sowah 1951, 1). The demonstrations of these early 'missionaries' of the popular culture of boxing gradually extended the frontiers of the 'new' sport into other parts of the colony.

It is apparent, then, that some luminaries of English and African extraction such as Williams and Edmund Bannerman had started the experiment of nurturing modern boxing on a small scale in Accra before Lawford's mandate. Considering Bannerman's elitist British ancestry and experience of England, it is possible that he had had an earlier exposure to the rudiments of English boxing and, realising the pugilistic endowments in Ga-Mashie, he started to introduce the sport to a handful of youths in Accra. Whether perceived as a harmless product of private fulfilment of leisure and recreational craving, experimentation with a novel idea and concept, or pursuance of European cultural ideals, pioneers like Williams and Bannerman, who introduced English-style boxing, became or served as 'indirect' agents of the British cultural dissemination and imperialist enterprise in the Empire. They may have been conscious or unaware of such a role. Nevertheless, within the context of a colonial territory, where many people commonly craved the hegemonic position of the colonisers and their cultural values and standards, often considered advanced, these pioneers must have had a craving for that cultural product. Therefore, they must have perceived the sport as a marker of civility and considered their initiative as a contribution to the progress of the prevailing urban popular culture of sports and recreation in Accra. Nevertheless, these pioneering experiments facilitated modern boxing's growth and initial acceptability among the Ga in Accra, particularly in the 1930s. The ban, government's interest in extending modern boxing, and Lawford's encouragement promoted the opening and proliferation of several boxing clubs in Accra, particularly in Jamestown and Ussher Town, and sustained a related budding organised amateur scene and betting characterised by quasi-professional boxing.

This amateur and semi-occupational boxing, monitored by the government, attracted limited patronage from the colonial administration. The state sponsored some of its tournaments. Sir Arnold Weinholt Hodson, who was governor from

1934–1941 and affectionately known as ‘the Sunshine Governor’ in Gold Coast, had by 1935 demonstrated a keen interest in boxing and donated a trophy to such state-supported boxing championship ventures. Such initial government-sponsored championships in the 1930s helped to groom early local boxers and champions and nurtured expert personnel, some of whom consequently contributed to the further maturity of boxing in the country. John Ebenezer Samuel (J.E.S.) de Graft-Hayford, (b. 1912 – d. 2002) was one such person. Born in the UK to a German mother and an African father from the notable Hayford family of nationalists, academics and Christian missionaries in Gold Coast (Amirrortotheenemy 2007, 1; Miller, Vandome, and McBrewster 2010; and Victor de Graft-Hayford 2011), he returned to Gold Coast around 1914. He participated in bare-fist fighting in Accra. Carrying the aliases of ‘Chocolate Kid’ and ‘Johnnie’, he became a local amateur and professional boxer and participated in some of the early colonial establishment-backed boxing championships from the 1930s to the early 1940s in Accra. He won the Gold Coast welterweight championship, which was sponsored by Captain Benest, a retired English soldier (Amirrortotheenemy 2007, 1; Miller, Vandome, and McBrewster 2010; and Victor de Graft-Hayford 2011). Chocolate Kid took the middleweight title of West Africa (Gold Coast and Nigeria) around 1941 and retired immediately (Amirrortotheenemy 2007, 1; Miller, Vandome, and McBrewster 2010; and Victor de Graft-Hayford 2011). He became a renowned pilot, soldier and statesman as well as a boxing trainer, referee and commentator, using his experience in boxing to assist the cultivation of the sport in the country. In 1953, he became an executive member of the Gold Coast Boxing Board of Control (the GCBBC) and joined a committee that made recommendations to the GCBBC for the establishment of a stadium. He was a founding member of the Ghana Boxing Board of Control (the GBBC). From about 1974 to 1978, he was a key member of the GBBC and one of the technocrats who assisted the country to get its first WBC titlist. Thus, the early Accra championships of the 1930s were key events for the growth of the culture of modern boxing in Ghana.

Another example of an early Accra championship took place in October 1937. It constituted welterweight bouts between Dempsey Armah and Jackado Quarcoo, who represented Battling Bukor, the champion of Nsawam, and Jimmy ‘Brown Bomber’ Brewater and Fireboy Lartey. Constituting, in addition, a catch-weight contest between Mickey Walker Allotey and Octopus Nortey [Nortei] (Nortei, who received some training from Surpriser Sowah, later became the West African heavyweight champion) (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15), it attracted the spectatorship of top colonial officials. This body of spectators included the then colonial Governor (*African Morning Post*, October 5, 1937).

The apparent presence of a colonial administration’s patronage to boxing, the



explosion of bouts and the making of champions promoted boxing as a popular pastime in Accra. More Ga youth, particularly from Ga-Mashie, where different gyms had sprouted, entered the sport. The colonial regime's encouragement of modern boxing among the Ga, particularly Ga-Mashie in Accra, was an astute appeasement gesture to a people dispossessed of an indigenous cultural sports product by the hegemonic colonial regime. Within the context of power relations in the command structure of colonialism in Gold Coast, the Ga formed part of the minority or subordinate nationality group. Therefore, this promotion of modern boxing among the Ga was an imperial force's way of placating the group's loss of its own pugilistic culture. It was also to perpetuate the superordinate nationality's authority and cultural product with English oriented socio-cultural codes, standards, laws and values among the indigenous community. By encouraging the minority to participate in modern boxing, the colonial authority implemented an old method of British cultural imperialism. This was the peddling and imposition, among subjects, of the idea of shared values. Thus, the promotion of modern English-style boxing in Accra and the ultimate adoption of it by the subordinate nationality, which were all enhanced by the ban, were in a way facilitated by overt and subtle coercion by the superordinate nationality. Perceptibly, a colonial manipulative psychology – psychology of shared values – also facilitated that assimilation. With this psychology, the minority nationality consciously or unconsciously perceived in modern boxing certain qualities and values similar to those that their indigenous sport promoted. These included healthy competition, group camaraderie, agility, tact, bravado, social prestige, fame and physical fitness. Thus, the British succeeded in making the Ga ('minority nationality') assimilate their version of pugilism. By bringing them into modern boxing, the hegemonic group were successful in making the 'illusion' of shared values work on the colonised nationality. Consequently, the indigenes did not surge to protect and/or reclaim their indigenous sport and cultural product. Such a surge would have registered as a local challenge against, and explosion of, the historically subtle British use of the idea and techniques of 'shared cultural values' to maintain and ensure political, economic, and cultural control.

From one standpoint, the ultimate general acceptance and adoption of modern boxing in Gold Coast represented a successful British cultural imperialist venture obtained through overt political coercion and subtle means. Nevertheless, it became part of the popular culture of colonial Gold Coast and postcolonial Ghana, serving as a cultural motif of recreational, economic and social utility. The cultural, moral and economic roots of the sport, products of social structures of marginality of many in the commoner group in the inner city of colonial Accra, made it a (sub) proletarian bodily trade. Only a few boxers, such as Chocolate Kid, joined boxing from a non-commoner class. Generally, this trade supplemented *asafo atwele* and/

or became an alternative to more conventional avenues of livelihood and mobility such as the school, the low-wage labour market and the informal street economy of the ghettos in Ga-Mashie, urban Accra, and ultimately the country. From the 1930s, the boxing scene continued to provide opportunities for many participants and enthusiasts, mainly from the commoner class, including fishermen, mechanical fitters, school dropouts, porters and drivers. They made a living as boxers and coaches, gained social recognition and international fame, and generated wealth for personal and communal use. The organisation of the sport received patronage from African merchants, lawyers, journalists, clerks and politicians and others of the upper and middle professional classes. These included A.J. Ocansey, Edmund Bannerman, Nnamdi Azikiwi, M. Therson Cofi, J.W. Blankson-Mills and Kojo Thompson. Some became managers, promoters, referees and owners of boxing clubs.

Apart from the Accra School of Boxing and Sparta, other boxing clubs emerged in Accra. A Boxers' Union and, later, the GCBBC also emerged. The popular venues of championship and betting contests in Central Accra, the hub of budding amateur and quasi-professional boxing, included the General Post Office Yard, J.J. Fisher's Yard, High Street and Commodore Arena in Jamestown. Clubs such as Accra Boxing Association, and Thunderbolts Athletic Club, Community Centre Boxing Club, and Catholic Youth Organisation (CYO) ('Ghana Amateur Boxing Association' n.d., 1), with their distinctive fighting and training styles became active on the country's boxing scene (Dunzendorfer 2011, 2152). Sowah's Sparta and Kid Hesse's Marconi Club and its famous coach Squire, or Dr Square, dominated the scene (Akyeampong 2002, 57). Their styles and orientations largely influenced boxers in the Ga-Mashie area of Ussher Town, particularly during the 1940s and 1950s. The Marconians, who trained near the Palladium Theatre, were known as 'the brawlers' (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010). They were 'fighters', not boxers, because they placed little emphasis on technique and skill (Rashidi Williams, pers. comm., February 20, 2009). They preferred employing a great deal of physical strength to break their opponents' resistance. 'The "Spartans" emphasised strategy, skill and tact. That is what boxing is and should be ... Sparta's products were not only "fighters" but "boxers" because they were strategic' (Rashidi Williams, pers. comm., February 20, 2009). They had an easy-to-identify style – backshift, sidestepping, sweep-ducking and others. Surpriser Sowah translated the peculiar fighting traits of animals like the leap of a frog or the fighting stance of a fowl into boxing styles and taught them with success (*Sɔ*, September 28, 1996, 15). Consequently, the Spartan tradition produced some of the boxing giants of the country. It trained Okai D.D.J., Satan Sackey, Octopus Nortei, Swordfish Ben, Sugar Ray Akwei, Sr, Attuquaye (also spelled Atukwei) Clottey, and Alhaji Awudu Kongoro. It gave Roy Ankrah his foundations of boxing. 'That tradition of "classical boxing" eventually produced



champions like D.K. Poison and Azumah Nelson in the 1970s and 1980s respectively' (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010). The boxing culture steadily expanded to bases in other parts of the country.

Early clubs in Accra were not equipped with appropriate and adequate training and fighting gadgets. They relied on nature's resources such as the beach for training. Like it did for *asafɔ atwele* manoeuvres, the beach provided space for jogging, shadow boxing and sparring. Sand and sawdust were put into jute and other strong fibre sacks to create punching bags. The insufficiency of vital resources and equipment, including those for safety, made the sport very dangerous for clubs of the time. Surpriser Sowah recounted the situation of his club:

Whatever equipment we [like others] had then was limited to not more than four pairs of old boxing gloves, skipping ropes, one speedball, one floor-to-ceiling ball, two pads and three punching bags – there were no head gears, protectors or cups and mouth pieces or gum shields. That was really the time boxing was dangerous.... (*Sɔ*, September 28, 1996, 15)

Yet, the gallant efforts of these early clubs produced luminaries who trained many of the latter-day boxing greats who brought international fame to the country. For example, Sparta's Attuquaye Clottey, who was also taught by Teacher Thompson of an early Akotoku [Boxing] Academy in Adabraka, established his own Akotoku Academy c.1972. Three boxing administration gurus from Ga-Mashie, namely Justice D.F. Annan, H. Atttoh Quarshie and H.P. Nyamitei assisted him in that project (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 103). Clottey, who was once a national welterweight champion, coached and tutored world champions such as D.K. Poison and Azumah Nelson. He discovered Ike Quartey, who became a world champion, and his trainer Dan Oko Odamtten, and Alfred Kotey, who became a WBC International super-bantamweight champion. Roy Ankrah also briefly instructed Floyd Klutei Robertson, who became the thirteenth champion of the Commonwealth featherweight division in 1960, the third West African to rule that division and first Ghanaian to fight for a World Boxing Championship belt. He discovered Nana Yaw Konadu (*Sɔ*, September 28, 1996, 15), who was originally from the Brong Ahafo Region in Ghana. Konadu shot into fame in 1984 and, within a decade, annexed the WBA, IBC, Commonwealth, and prestigious continental and national titles in super-flyweight and bantamweight divisions.

Popular participation and interest for the burgeoning boxing culture increased particularly in the 1950s. Many clubs emerged in parts of the country, predominantly in the eastern and western sections. Two main factors accounted for this. One was Roy Ankrah's international victory accomplishment in 1951. It inspired and made proud many Ga boxers and African Gold Coasters. It expressed a symbolic and

subtle victory of a colonial territory over the colonial power. The second was the Flight Sergeant Jack W. Roy factor. Jack Roy was an experienced British boxer who helped to prepare the British team that won two gold medals at the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne. He counselled the Convention People's Party (CPP) government of Ghana to give the sport a nationwide reach in order to unearth talents for the national team and professional scene. Accordingly, the government engineered efforts to revamp boxing and give it a wider operational coverage in the country.

The Ankrah factor was a product of his legend. Ankrah's celebrated fame as a boxer started in the 1930s. He became the featherweight and lightweight champion of Gold Coast in 1939. Acam Syndicate, a pioneer boxing syndicate that operated during that nascent stage of the GCBBC-supervised amateur boxing in Accra, engendered this professional breakthrough when it promoted Ankrah to fight Jimmy Borland. The latter was defeated. Surpriser Sowah recounted in 1996: 'I could remember, Roy was a strong boxer and unbeatable' (*Sp*, September 28, 1996, 15). He defeated Tiger Mumuni to win the bantamweight championship in 1941 before joining the Gold Coast Regiment in Burma during World War II. From 1943, he fought exhibition and competitive bouts in other parts of the Far East and acquired a reputation as a good boxer from Gold Coast. He exhibited with the African-American legendary boxer Sugar Ray Robinson (*DG*, September 20, 1951, 8).¹⁹ He defeated contenders like Sergeants Evans and Briggs of the British Army, the all India-China-Burma champion John Miller, and the Filipino, Young Tarley. He sparred with Freddie Mills, former British and Commonwealth middleweight champion. Mills, who became a heavyweight, served for about a year with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in the Far East as a light entertainer – boxer – for the British troops. Mills went to England in 1946 and in 1950 assisted Ankrah's entrance into licensed professional boxing in Britain.

Relieved of his military duties, Ankrah returned to Gold Coast c.1947 and defeated Kid Hesse, lightweight champion of Gold Coast, at the Old Polo Ground, Accra. He also defeated Stoker Kid Parry at the Lagos Race Course, Nigeria, to annex the West African featherweight title. His fame and accomplishments inspired others to box and motivated many young boxers in Ga-Mashie, especially Swalaba.

An Accra-based promoter, Mr Rodger Lutterodt, assisted Roy Ankrah to travel to Glasgow, Scotland, to seek entry into the international professional field. Mr Herbert George, a Gold Coaster in Glasgow, helped him to acquire a boxing licence. Ankrah 'made his [professional] debut in Britain in 1950 on the recommendation of Freddie Mills' (Fleischer 1955, 721; *BoxRec Boxing Encyclopedia* 2009, s.v. 'Roy Ankrah'). With a combination of knockouts (KOs), technical knockouts (TKOs) and points (PTS) he defeated contenders such as George Lamont, Zeke Brown, Len Shaw, Peter Morrison, Joe King, Danny Nagle, Denny Dennis, Jim McCann, Gene Cafery, Francisco Latore, Tommy Bailey, Luis Romero, Bernard Pugh and Tony Lombard.



Managed by Joe McKean, Ankrah defeated Speedy Bandes before defeating Ronnie Clayton on April 30, 1951 to become the British Commonwealth featherweight champion. He became the second colonial West African to win an international title. The first was Battling Siki of Senegal, who kayoed Georges Carpentier of France (Sowah 1951, 4) in 1922 to become a world heavyweight champion.

Roy Ankrah's victory had political implications. Like Max Schmeling who, in a bout with Joe Louis, was detested by many Americans who perceived him as a representative of Nazi Germany, Clayton was symbolic of British colonialism in Gold Coast. Many African Gold Coasters had their interest in boxing intensified as they consciously or unconsciously celebrated Ankrah's victory as a perforation of the ego of British imperialists and a disintegration of the myth of white superiority upon which colonialism stood.

Boxing led Ankrah to travel abroad, make money, gain international exposure, and meet high political officials including the Queen of England (Sowah 1951, 2). Back in Gold Coast he became famous. He was honoured with regal gifts from the Asantehene, Otumfour Sir Agyeman Prempeh II, and Omanhene of Akyem Abuakwa, Nana Ofori Atta. The Governor, Sir Charles Arden Clarke, and Kwame Nkrumah, leader of Government Business, congratulated him. The GCBBC organised a dance in his honour (Sowah 1951, 4). Ankrah's fame and success drew spectatorship to boxing and encouraged the socioeconomically less fortunate youth, especially in Accra, to take the sport seriously as a giver of opportunities. This influence continued through the subsequent decades and has remained intact. There is a generational tradition where the successes of early Ga boxers continue to inspire other promising boxers. In a personal interview on February 20, 2009, Rashidi Williams mentioned that boxing is still perceived by many, especially the participants, as a giver of wealth and social recognition. Especially for those in Ga-Mashie, it is a revered cultural legacy, as the trainer Rashidi Williams, alias Believer, disclosed:

I train many youth today. Boxing keeps them off the street and it occupies their time ... However, they all want to become like the Surpriser Sowahs and Roy Ankrahs and those that they inspired, like the Floyd Robertsons, D.K. Poisons and Azumah Nelsons. This aspiration has become part of the youth who love boxing. The Robertsons and Azumahs also wanted to become like their heroes and, similarly, gain the recognition that they got. This tradition also keeps the passion and spirit of boxing alive among us [Ga-Mashie and Ga people].²⁰

Strikingly, Ankrah's legend and heroism also inspired paeans in his honour.

The Ga-Mashie created songs to honour heroes and, as they did during wars and for *asafo atwele*, they created and sang odes to praise Ankrah and encourage the male youth to follow his example. The following is a literal translation of one:

*Roy Ankrah is gone to England [overseas]
 Atuquaye [Attuquaye] Clottey good-bye in far-off land
 This comes from nothing but industriousness
 Bukom youth keep striving always.²¹*

Interestingly, the heroic achievements of Ankrah and Clottey inspired pride in Ghanaians and other Africans and 'Blacks' elsewhere. Abarry (1984, 496) reveals that 'Black Flash', a song of the legendary West Indian calypsonian Lord Kitchener, celebrated the speed, and physical and mental agility of Ankrah over Ronnie Clayton. Such local and international songs reminded Ga and Ghanaian youth of those achievements, and exhorted them to strive for self-assertion, honour and achievements (Abarry 1984, 496). Ankrah's victory also firmly mortised boxing into the sports of the country's colonial army. Prior to World War II, the army had been unenthusiastic about encouraging the sport because of the prevailing fear that boxing could damage spleens enlarged and weakened by endemic malaria (Akyeampong, 2002, 52). When the war broke out, one Major Tomlin, an army physical training instructor, energised boxing in the army, which added strength to the budding sport in the colony. Ankrah benefitted from that military experiment when he enlisted. The major international victory of the ex-serviceman brought pride to the army and encouraged a stronger growth of boxing in the army during the 1950s.

The enthusiasm for boxing that his victory unleashed manifested in other locales of the country. New clubs emerged in Ashanti (Asante) Region and later the Trans-Volta area. In fact, his earlier victories and successes abroad had even triggered the formation of boxing clubs. For example, in the Old and New Towns of Oda in the Eastern Region 'young men had formed the clubs because they were encouraged to do so by the successes of Roy Ankrah, the 'Black Flash', in England' (DG, April 19, 1951, 8).

Many boxers became famous during the 1950s because of their prowess at the amateur and professional levels. Provincial (regional), national and West African champions and local heroes also emerged. That era boasted notable old and new boxers such as Jack Toller, who in 1951 was the heavyweight champion of Gold Coast and West Africa, Billy Wells, the welter- and middleweight champion of Gold Coast, and Billy Kwaku Nkran, who was once the middleweight champion of Ashanti Region. Others were Gaskia Kafaru, Armstrong Agbana, Lucifer Bonsu, Thunder Latukwei and Surpriser Botchway. Yet others, such as Ogli Tettey and Richard Armah, had followed the steps of Ankrah and gone professional internationally. Armah fought in places such as England, Brussels and Scotland (DG, November 8, 1951, 5; DG, November 15, 1951, 8). Other sensations included Jack Armstrong, who was the leading welterweight in the Western Province. He also went to England (DG,



November 8, 1951, 5). Such emigrations in search of fame and bigger purses overseas became fashionable in the 1950s. So, some managers started to scout for good boxers and negotiated for some of them to go abroad to fight. In 1951 a manager from the United Kingdom started negotiations for Sparta's lightweight Attuquaye Clotthey to fight in England (*DG*, October 18, 1951, 8). Consequently, several Ga boxers, including Floyd Klutei Robertson, Kimpo Amarfio, Dennis Adjei, 'London Kid', P.J. Cobblah and Sugar Gibiliru (Akyeampong 2002, 47), went to London in the 1950s. Nevertheless, the careers of all of them supported the development of boxing in the country.

The Jack Roy factor in boxing's growth was significant. Generally, organised amateur sports development had been undertaken in pre-independence Ghana by enthusiastic private individuals, a few informal groups, and some schools. The autonomous sports associations managed their own affairs under the colonial administration's recognition and virtual control.

The Accra-based Boxers' Union regulated the rules, ratings and activities of the embryonic amateur and professional boxing fraternity in the colony. It was disbanded around the late 1930s when the GCBBC was created. As a subsidiary of the British Boxing Board of Control (BBBC), the GCBBC was obliged to take regulatory instructions from that overarching body and implement them in the colony. For example, in 1951 the BBBC stipulated that a boxer could not hold more than one title at a time. Accordingly, the GCBBC compelled Billy Wells, Gold Coast's heavy, middle, and welterweight champion, to relinquish two of the titles (*DG*, November 9, 1951, 8). Britain unquestionably exerted a paternalistic control over sports, particularly boxing, in Gold Coast. The Gold Coast Amateur Sports Council (GCASC), a subsidiary of a 'superintending' body in England, was mandated to permit or reject the establishment of amateur and professional sports groups and oversee their activities and organisation. The Gold Coast Amateur Sports Ordinance, Number 14, enacted in 1952 and meant to boost sports, legally strengthened the authority of the GCASC to superintend the various amateur groups (Ghana, Central Region 2009, 2). Mandated to encourage and control sports, that council was authorised to grant affiliation status to any verifiable association, but not to support them financially and otherwise (Vieta 1990, 561). This was the 'self-help' or 'individual enterprise' era (Ansah and Gede 1999, 5). Mainly left to their own devices, amateur boxing fraternities struggled to sustain themselves in the early part of the 1950s. This period, however, witnessed some positive political changes that signalled the imminence of independence for the colony. The leading African in government affairs, Kwame Nkrumah, foreseeing self-determination, stated in 1952 that the colony was attracting international admiration for achieving changes 'which have never been surpassed by any subject people within such a short time'

(*DG*, August 5, 1952, 8). As the administration of the country gradually started to tilt towards African control, sports shifted slowly but steadily away from the 'self-help' era. Sports transcended the period of colonial-originated 'ceremonial/official' recognition, mentorship and control, and began to attract physical support from the government.

The about-to-be-independent colony engaged the international community in major activities such as the 1952 Olympics Games and the 1954 Empire (Commonwealth) Games in Vancouver. Following independence in 1957, the country, renamed Ghana in proud reminiscence of the gold-rich and powerful Western Sudan Soninke state, attended the 1958 sixth Empire (Commonwealth) Games in Cardiff.

The state of boxing in Ghana, c.1958 to c.1980

After 1957, Kwame Nkrumah and his government and the Ministry of Education and Information, also responsible for sports, continued efforts for Ghana to administer and restore its amateur sports. In July 1960, when Ghana became a Republic, a presidential declaration dissolved the Sports Ordinance 14 of 1952 and instituted a Central Organisation of Sports (COS). The COS was given powerful control of affairs of Ghana sports and Ohene Djan became its first Director. Certain sports, including football, athletics, boxing, lawn and table tennis, basketball and hockey, were selected for development (Vieta, 1990, 561). The COS focused on some government-assisted sporting clubs like the Ghana Real Republicans and Ghana Academicals football clubs. As motivation, employment was given to sports personalities in state and parastatal organisations, such as the United Ghana Farmers Council, Workers Brigade, State Farms Corporation, and the security agencies. They were encouraged by the COS to win continental and international sports laurels for Ghana (Ansah and Gede 1999). The mandate of the COS was the first organised governmental effort at advancing sports in Ghana. Other government organisations in charge of sports improvement that followed the First Republic were inspired by the COS. Change of governments led to change in the names and policy of state organisations in charge of sports. For example, after the First Republic was toppled in a coup in 1966, the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports replaced the COS. In 1978, it was Sport Ministry. In 1979, it became the Ministry of Culture and Sports. During the Third Republic and era of the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC), it was known as the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Nevertheless, they all sought to develop sports in varying degrees (Ansah and Gede 1999).

The primary aim of state organisations in charge of sports in the country since the 1950s has essentially been to use sports to promote national development, stability



and progress, inculcate a sense of national consciousness, and develop and promote sports at national and international levels, to foster friendship, promote pleasure and good health, and provide avenues for gainful employment, especially for the youth (Ansah and Gede 1999, 4). Consequently, this section of government has worked with different sub-agencies, including the National Youth Council (NYC) and National Sports Council (NSC), which graded sports and supervised voluntary sporting associations such as the National Sports College in Winneba (NSCW), established in 1984 to train athletes and sportspersons and certify coaches, among other duties. These councils operated with the mandate to promote and encourage general participation of both males and females without discrimination to the physically challenged for recreation and excellence in popular disciplines such as football and boxing and less-known ones such as chess, weightlifting, body building and base/softball (Ansah and Gede 1999, 5).

Boxing's growth and popularity in the 1950s, supported by the GCBBC, GCASC and local promoters and clubs, inspired several national and international amateur competitions. An early international contest was organised in August 1952 in Accra between Ghana and Nigeria (PRAAD RG.9/1/10).²² Boxers from Accra dominated the Ghanaian team in the international contests that usually occurred in Accra.

The prevailing problem of logistics did not abate in new areas where boxing reached. However, the local clubs persevered and built makeshift rings and acquired basic, albeit inadequate, equipment such as gloves, pads and punching bags. For example, by October 1952 the boxing group in Nsawam, with support from the Catholic Youth Organisation (CYO), had built a basic ring made of cement in the CYO-established stadium (PRAAD RG.9/1/10, 1952).²³ The provision of this modest facility was one piece of proof that boxing was gradually progressing in Nsawam (PRAAD RG.9/1/10, 1952).²⁴

With formal and informal contests occurring in localities in Kumasi, Accra, Oda, Nsawam, Koforidua and the Western Province, the GCBBC issued ratings (rankings). The ratings of the quarter term which was to end on December 31, 1952 were as follows: for heavyweight, the champion was Jack Toller, followed by Kobla Geyevu, Swordfish Ben, Kid Foster, Lucifer Yermo and Jack Foster Solomon. The middleweight champion was Billy Wells, followed by Gaskia Kafaru, Terrible Quarshie, Battling Coca Cola, Kwatelai Quartey and Amaa Aku, with Billy Adams being a probable. The welterweight division had London Kid as champion, followed by Surpriser Botchway, Billy Kotey, Thunder Lartukwei, Mighty Joe Williams and Casino Sawyerr. Attuquaye Clottey, Atlas Mensah, Onion Tetteh, Mickey Jones, Armstrong Apenteng and Salifu Bukari were probables. The lightweight title was vacant. The number one contender was Armstrong Agbana, followed by Sugar Allotey, P.J. Cobblah, Adjetey Sowah and Nii France. Kid Boye, Yaro Wicked Akwei

and Torpedo Lamptey were probables. The vacant featherweight title had Young Spider Neequaye as the first contender, followed by Ginger Nyarko, Marvellous Tettey and Octopus Djane. Bombardier Ayinla, Andrews Martey, Dragon Yartey and Odartey Frans were probables. The champion for the bantamweight division was Young Spider Neequaye, followed by Terror Ayivi and Seth Annum. The flyweight title was vacant. The contenders were Little Joe, Jr, Ogli Tettey, Terror Ayivi and Influenza Armah. Piercing Kid, Sugar Mamah and D.O. Charlie were probables (*DG*, August 5, 1952, 8). These ratings testified that the boxing culture with its hub in Accra was coming of age. Localities around the Volta River in the east, (now Volta Region) also started to cultivate clubs, such as the establishment, by 1953, of the Kpandu Amateur Boxing Club, for example (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, GCABA).²⁵

This promising maturation of boxing produced the First Tournament of the Gold Coast [Colony] Amateur Boxing Association (the GCABA) at the Accra Sports Stadium on February 7, 1953. This non-title performance featured several contenders such as S.K. Laryea, S. Mankattah, K. Amegbe, F. Kane, K. Mensah, T. Dove, F. Eme and B. Salifu. Participants came from Accra-based clubs and clubs outside Accra such as the Ashirife Boxing Club in Nsawam, and Sekondi-Takoradi Youth Council (*DG*, February 9, 1953, 8). The participation of Frans Dove, a 56-year-old Accra barrister, proved the escalating popularity of the sport.

Despite its popularity, organised boxing faced financial and logistical problems. The absence of a boxing stadium was a major issue for the GCBBC. Consequently, in May 1953 the Board commissioned a six-man committee headed by Edmund Bannerman, the Board's vice-president, to make recommendations to a body of stewards for the establishment of a stadium. The committee, comprising Messrs [J.E.S.] de Graft-Hayford, Kalmoni, Barton, Kwesi Mould and Wynbegger, discussed the project, drafted an estimate and stipulated the procedure to bring the stadium into being. It submitted a report to the president of the Board, Mr George Crowe (*DG*, July 23, 1953, 8). However, the committee erred in its estimate. While the committee recommended a 46 000-seater mega stadium, it inexplicably estimated the cost of such a stadium between a meagre £7 000 and an insufficient £8 000 (*DG*, July 23, 1953, 8). More money was therefore required. Consequently, the Board invoked the lingering spirit of self-help and recommended that a small loan should be obtained from the government, while appealing to the public for funds. Moreover, the government was to provide the land, preferably a site near the sports stadium of the GCASC on Rowe Road in Accra (*DG*, July 23, 1953, 8).

No loan came from government. Although Nkrumah was leader of Government Business, his quasi-African government, still under the British monarch and the governor Sir Arden Clarke, was limited in what it could do, including the granting of loans for the erection of boxing stadiums.



Moreover, within a ferment of turbulent nationalist politics and inter-party rivalry, often displayed along ethnic and regional lines, and economic pressures unleashed by World War II on both the colony and Britain, the political administrative structure was confronted with the pressing task of mapping out the independence and future of Gold Coast. Funding the building of a costly boxing stadium was, by political and economic logic, the least of its concerns and priorities. Its priorities appeared to have been couched in an estimated £100 million Five-Year Development Plan and Accelerated Development Plan for Education. From 1951 to 1954 these schemes produced some striking improvements in the telecommunications, transport and educational infrastructural sectors of the country.²⁶ The GCBBC could not accrue substantial funding from public benevolence. Consequently, the boxing stadium was not built and Ghana remained without a boxing stadium for a long time.²⁷ This fiasco and general paucity of infrastructure in the 1950s compelled the officials in charge of boxing's administration to plan a national campaign to garner funds and strong popular interest to push the sport forward. Therefore, the National Council, a superordinate body of the GCABA, was instituted on October 1, 1956. Mandated to generate funds to boost amateur boxing, the Council decided that £3 000 should be raised from public donations to purchase equipment for clubs. Furthermore, boxing was to be decentralised from Accra, and advertised especially to the young and at secondary and tertiary educational institutions. Regional committees were to be established throughout the country to organise inter-school matches and regional championships and to publicise boxing (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, GCABA).²⁸ Letters were dispatched to heads of secondary schools and teacher training colleges to seek their support. Others went to several prominent people and boxing enthusiasts to solicit funds. These included Messrs T. Mead of Ho, Dugbatey of the Department of Housing in Accra, R.T. Orleans-Pobee of Adisadel College in Cape Coast and Bombay Daniels of the Department of Social Welfare, Cape Coast (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, GCABA).²⁹

This national campaign continued, and new clubs emerged. One was the Ho Boys/Youth Club Boxing Group, which emerged in the eastern part of the country (present day Volta Region), on November 26, 1956. It trained on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays and charged a monthly fee of 4d to support itself (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, GCABA).³⁰

Moreover, the GCABA acquired some boxing gloves and announced, in the *DG* in 1957, the distribution of free gloves in Accra to gyms and clubs in the country.³¹ Such overtures inspired the formation of new clubs and boxing demonstrations. Matches for novices were held in several areas, including Kpandu and Ho in the Trans-Volta Togoland (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, GCABA).

Upon independence, the GCASC, whose president and vice president were Sir

Leslie McCarthy and Sir Arku Korsah, respectively, became the Ghana Amateur Sports Council (the GASC), although the COS later overshadowed it. Similarly, the GCABA became the Ghana Amateur Boxing Association (the GABA), and Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah and Sir Leslie McCarthy became its patron and president, respectively. The National Council for Amateur Boxing comprised R.P. Balfour, B.E. Carmen, W.B. Carter, W.R. Feaver, W.Q. Halm, J.C. Lucas, R. MacMillan (OBE), S.E. Odamtten (OBE), Major General A.G. Paley (CBE, DSO) and G.A. Zangger (PRAAD RG.9/1/23).³² The GABA was mandated to bring existing and yet to be formed regional amateur boxing associations under its umbrella. It was authorised to (i) foster amateur boxing; (ii) train coaches using the principles of the International Amateur Boxing Association; (iii) institute a nationwide training programme for amateur boxers; (iv) implement courses for judges and referees; and (v) train the national team. Moreover, it was (vi) to prepare a team for the 1960 Olympics in Rome (PRAAD GABA File, RG.9/1/31).³³ The GABA took charge of the regional groups and made efforts to implement an existing plan of the GCABA to raise an efficient team for Cardiff in 1958. The GCABA planned in 1957 to bring Jack W. Roy from the UK to provide technical advice for overhauling boxing and building an effective national team and the GABA subsequently invited him. The invitation of experts from abroad to assist the sports sector after independence manifested also within the football realm. For example, the Ghana Amateur Football Association (the GAFA) invited the famous English footballer Sir Stanley Matthews, alias the Saint of Soccer, to come to Ghana to observe the football scene and make recommendations to help improve its organisation. Following his counsel, the GAFA employed several foreign coaches from England, Sweden, Italy, West Germany and Hungary to make 'scientific' coaching available to many clubs and to assist in training and unearthing local talent (Vieta 1990, 567). It is noteworthy that this paradigm has endured, although it was originally conceived to be transient and facilitate a rapid Africanisation of the management and coaching of national sports.

The GABA asked Roy Ankrah to assist Jack Roy in building the national team. Ankrah, on the advice of Nkrumah, had returned to Ghana in July 1955 after the French boxer Ray Famechon defeated him and curtailed his dream of fighting the WBC featherweight champion, Sandy Saddler. He worked with the Workers Brigade as coach, and subsequently with the COS (Vieta 1990, 574). Ankrah used his valuable skills, experience, and knowledge of the local boxing terrain and its talented fighters to support the work of Jack Roy. A team known as the Black Bombers was built and, in 1960, Ankrah, on Parliament's appointment, became its first Ghanaian boxing coach (Vieta 1990, 574). He retired from active coaching around 1980 and became an attaché to the Greater Accra Regional Sports Council as a senior boxing advisor.

The word 'Black' in the name of the team, like the black lodestar ideogram in



Ghana's flag, came from Nkrumah's conscious efforts to glorify the colour and concept of black(ness) which, for years under colonialism, had negative connotations. The usage of 'Black' was employed to invoke the constructive ideas of African Pride, African Personality, and African Renaissance, and promote them within all Ghanaians and peoples of African descent. In the pursuance of that philosophy, Ohene Djan of the COS, who chaired the GAFA in 1957, re-organised the student-dominated football team – the Academicals – in October 1960 into the national team called Black Stars.³⁴ The team was given this name to symbolise and project certain African nationalist political concepts that were forcefully being emphasised by President Nkrumah (Vieta 1990, 567).

Jack Roy came to Ghana on January 27, 1958 and immediately started to work with Ankrah. A familiarisation tour consisting of visits to the regions and clubs that constituted the regional associations was planned to acquaint him with the boxing scene (PRAAD RG.9/1/13).³⁵ The GABA requested him to instruct and coach boxers and coaches for six or seven hours on some days at the Accra Police Headquarters and Army PT School in Accra, and clubs that constituted Accra's Regional Amateur Boxing scene (PRAAD RG.9/1/13).³⁶ Furthermore, the GABA suggested that more coaches and judges should be trained (by the national coaches) to promote boxing in the army (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, Letter BCI/6).³⁷

Jack Roy and the GABA organised inter-regional championships, and regional clubs eagerly engaged in intra and inter-club contests with the hope of providing members for the national team. Some companies and other stakeholders provided financial and material support. The Accra Brewery sponsored one on March 22, 1958 in Accra. This was the beginning of a long history of the prevailing tradition of the corporate world doing business with boxing in the country. This tradition has enabled sponsors to use boxing shows and icons to advertise and sell their products.

The competitions prepared boxers for national championships, provided platforms for the selection of fighters for the national team (PRAAD RG.9/1/13, Letter TVTR. /23),³⁸ and gave avenues to association executives and members to interact. National individual championships were organised alongside the inter-regional championships. The national fights for 1958 were mainly staged at Cadbury and Fry House, High Street, Central Accra. Spectators were charged about 2/- and 1/- for the preliminaries and 7/6, 5/- and 2/- for finals.³⁹ Intended to facilitate collaboration and interaction between the regional associations for concerted growth (PRAAD GABA File, RG.9/1/30)⁴⁰ and yield funds and private sponsorships and public awareness to support Ghana boxing and the national team, such traditions of local and national major contests endured through the 1960s.

Through a series of justify-your-claim (inclusion) bouts and the inter-regional tournaments 'probables' for Cardiff were selected. Boxers from Accra again dominated

the scene. The probables included: Private Tijani Dosumu from the army, lightweight Alhassan Braimah from the Community Centre Boxing Club, who was also adjudged by the GABA as 'best boxer of the year', light lightweight Okoe Anum from the police, middleweight Samuel Osei and welterweight Joseph Lartey. Others were lightweight Ike Quarthey, light middleweight Tetteh Thompson, featherweight Floyd Quarthey, bantamweight John Allen and featherweight Samuel Abbey, all from the YMCA Club, and Charles Allotey. The final entry for Cardiff comprised: bantamweight John Allen, featherweight Floyd Quarthey, lightweight Ike Quarthey, welterweight Joseph Lartey, lightweight Braimah Alhassan and middleweight Samuel Osei. The team and coaches Jack Roy and Roy Ankrah proudly and optimistically departed Takoradi for Cardiff on May 21, 1958. The boxing team did not take any medals. Only one bronze was obtained in athletics. The Ghana sports contingent 'equalled or excelled their individual best performance in nearly every event contested, they possessed enormous natural ability ... which ... it hardly exploited to produce the best results' (PRAAD RG.9/1/24).⁴¹

After identifying rushed preparation and lack of boxing infrastructure as reasons for the unimpressive performance, the GABA immediately proceeded to prepare an Olympic team and, at the same time, innovate measures to strengthen the capacity of clubs and regional associations. The country had a large cohort of clubs. Asante Region had clubs such as the Obuasi Boxing Club, Kwadaso Builders Brigade Amateur Boxing Club, Kumasi YMCA Amateur Boxing Club, Ayidja Boxing Club, Ghana Police Force Boxing Club, and Ghana Regiment Boxing Club (PRAAD, GABA File, RG.9/1/31).⁴² The Western Region association, which had J.E. Hagan, the Regional Commissioner, as its patron, J.W. Todd Esq., and J.A. Osei as its president and chairperson, respectively, and H.B. Dadzie as its secretary, had clubs such as Takoradi Amateur Club, Sekondi UP-Hill School of Boxing, Tarkwa and Aboso Amateur Boxing Club, UAC/Hayford Boxing Club, Nanta Boxing Club, Tarkwa Miners Club and Ghana Army Boxing Club, which was an *ex-officio* member of the region's association (PRAAD, GABA File).⁴³ The Northern Region association, which had Alhaji Y. Tali Tolon-Na, MP, as its president and Salifu Yakubu as its chairman, included the Amateur School of Boxing, comprising some 20 members, Tamale Boxing Club, Army Boxing Club, made up of about 25 members, and Bawku Boxing Club, which had about 30 active members. Other areas, such as Pusiga, Bolga and Yendi, were in the process of establishing clubs sanctioned by the GABA (PRAAD, GABA File).⁴⁴ The Eastern Regional association included Ring Boxing Club, Topen Boxing Club, Saahene Boxing Club, Community Centre Boxing Club and Ghanass Boxing Club.

The GABA then initiated some corporate sponsored tournaments such as the UTC Trophy Tournament. They were open to all clubs including school-based ones such as



Adisadel College Boxing Club in Cape Coast, Ghanass Boxing Club in Koforidua, St Francis Training College Boxing Club in Hohoe and Bishop Herman Secondary School Boxing Club in Kpandu. The tournament was staged to establish the Champion Boxing Club of Ghana (PRAAD, GABA File, RG.9/1/31).⁴⁵ In pursuance of a 'catch-them-young for boxing' policy, the GABA encouraged heads of second cycle schools to start boxing clubs for students in their schools. A missive from the headmaster of Bishop Herman Secondary School to the GABA revealed the desire to establish clubs and strengthen those in existence, although the issue of lack of basic facilities and coaches persisted in most of the schools, including Bishop Herman (PRAAD, GABA File, RG.9/1/31).⁴⁶ To ameliorate this problem, the GABA commissioned Jack Roy and Roy Ankrah in 1959 to train students and distribute gloves to boxing clubs in schools (PRAAD, GABA File, RG.9/1/31).⁴⁷

Within this atmosphere of capacity building, the Accra and Sekondi-Takoradi (Western Region) associations were more progressive than those of other regions in terms of organisation and facilities (PRAAD GABA File, RG.9/1/30).⁴⁸ The Accra association was dominated in terms of numbers by clubs from Central Accra, especially Bukom. Other clubs were Builders Brigade Boxing Club at Kanda, Christiansborg Amateur Boxing Club and Star Amateur Boxing Club. The Police and Army boxing groups were *ex officio* members. Accra was ahead because of its privilege as the starting point of boxing and national headquarters. Its boxers therefore had more experience and exposure. Its association, which used to organise tourneys and training courses for referees, judges and coaches, had access to greater sponsorship, funds and logistics from the national coffers and big corporations and companies within the country's capital. The sister cities of Sekondi-Takoradi, being the epicentres of boxing in the Western Region, also had easier access to equipment and gear, which, with the presence of the harbour, easily came to the area from abroad. The port also attracted international visitors, which included boxing enthusiasts such as fighters, coaches and betters. That situation contributed to the strengthening of the sport through effective organisation of the clubs and fights to meet such popular demand and make financial gains and organisational progress for the association. Incidentally, Eddie Blay, one of Ghana's boxing greats, was originally a product of that locality, 'from Ekwe, a village not far from Sekondi and Takoradi' (Eddie Blay, Jr, pers. comm., January 29, 2011). He mainly pursued his craft in Accra and won a Bronze medal for the Black Bombers at the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games (Vieta 1990, 575).

Despite its position as the leading association, it became known that all was not well for the Accra association, which in 1959 was chaired by Captain Amoah. T.N. Quaye, the secretary of the Accra association, lamented in a letter to the GABA in 1959 that the region that had provided ninety-nine per cent of the national team lacked equipment and that shadow boxing had become the order of the day for its

boxers. It also had debt of more than G. £100 (100 Ghanaian pounds).⁴⁹ Left with a meagre reserve of G. £56 in the bank, it needed to be supported (PRAAD, GABA File, RG.9/1/31).⁵⁰

While most associations in 1959 criticised the GABA for not being able to attract stronger government intervention to amateur boxing, they beseeched the government practically and sustainably to finance, equip and organise boxing. But government was not responsible for boxing alone, carrying the financial cost of the entire sports squad to Cardiff. It also had huge expenses for sports development in general and the sponsoring of another national contingent to Rome. Worried that boxing would lose its verve among the unhappy and weak associations, the GABA decided to initiate some structural reforms among the associations to empower them. Jack Roy advised the GABA to send its organising secretary and other members, Roy Ankrah and himself to the regions and their capitals to experience the associations and their problems and motivate them to keep the sport alive by being more self-sustaining. The GABA requested that a report of constructive recommendations, crafted to improve the organisation of association boxing and strengthen the competitive power of Ghana boxing, should be produced by the tour team and submitted to the GABA. Meanwhile, the GABA ordered regional championships to be held and a national individual championship to be staged in April 1960 to expedite the building of the Olympic team. Appeals were made to the public, individuals and companies for trophies, financial donations and other aid for the championships. The Accra Brewery was obtained to sponsor an Annual Brewery Cup for regional boxers in their regions and finally in Accra in 1960. Aspro-Nicholas Limited, an English pharmaceutical company known to be interested in sports because it provided the trophy for the Ohene Djan-instituted 1957 'Aspro Cup' national football knock-out programme, was entreated to provide the trophies for the different pre-Olympics boxing contests. The Tema-based Parkinson and Howard Limited were asked for a financial donation to support the cultivation of a boxing and a national team.

The GABA entourage started the national tour in July 1959 and returned to Accra on the first of August. The national coaches and some boxers from Accra and regional associations staged demonstration bouts for local boxers and instructed them in potent techniques. They gave technical counsel to coaches and listened to the grievances of gyms and local clubs concerning scarcity of facilities and organisational weaknesses. The delegation encouraged the associations to promote the formation of boxing clubs in schools. The entourage visited schools and gave lectures about boxing. In schools such as St Thomas Methodist School, in Obuasi, their appeal for collegiate boxing received the full support of the staff. In others, such as Opoku Ware Secondary School, in Kumasi, the school's boxing club met and received them



cordially. However, for unknown reasons, perhaps because of a personal distaste for boxing or a dwindling interest for the sport, the Principal, Reverend Father P.R. Burgess, disrupted that initial cordial reception. He walked into the meeting and ordered the delegation to leave the school's premises. He addressed the national coach thus: 'You are out of bounds on this compound, sir, will you go' (PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/24).⁵¹ Nevertheless, the report and exposé on the Ghanaian boxing scene presented to the GABA indicated that there was a great deal of interest in amateur boxing among the youth in all the regions and there were enthusiastic people willing to sacrifice their time in boosting the sport in the country. It suggested, however, that this popular main interest should be well harnessed through well-ordered District and Regional associations. The report showed a lack of trained coaches, which constrained boxers from achieving their aim of excellence in the sport. In addition, it highlighted the problem of scarcity of equipment in most of the active clubs, about which coaches, trainers and managers complained, and which made it difficult if not impossible for clubs to meet the basic training needs of boxers and achieve high standards in technique. Accordingly, the report suggested that it was imperative for the GABA to address these existing issues and, moreover, promote and support the culture of daily practice sessions and regular tournaments among boxing members of individual boxing clubs to assist them in gaining more skill and experience. The coverage showed that the associations were generally weak because most clubs were either not or only loosely affiliated to them. Furthermore, many of those that were affiliated did not pay their dues regularly because the command and operational structure of the associations were inadequately organised and therefore did not function properly (PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/24). The team recommended that the COS and the GABA should immediately implement existing plans to organise courses for training coaches, referees and judges for the benefit of the clubs and associations. The report stated that the National Council must provide equipment to the regions, especially to those whose affiliated clubs were 'paid up' to help promote regular tournaments among clubs. It was hoped that this would ensure efficacy in the regions' administration. In addition, the associations had to be re-organised to be more representative of amateur boxers and boxing in their zones and the country as a whole. The team also suggested a decentralisation of regional amateur boxing, so that the associations would not directly be in charge of the organisation and supervision of clubs in every 'nook and cranny' within districts in the region. District Amateur Boxing Associations (DABA) had to be formed for effective administration under the level of Regional Amateur Boxing Associations (RABA). They were to have periodic regional conferences to share ideas and to combine their efforts toward the improvement and strengthening of organised boxing in Ghana.

For the Eastern RABA, the Koforidua DABA was to cater for Koforidua,

Akropong, Suhum, New Tafo, Larteh, Somanya, Agomanya, etc. and Nsawam for clubs at Nsawam, Asamankese, Kade, Akim (Akyem) Swedru, Akim (Akyem) Oda, etc. For the Volta RABA, Ho was to oversee Ho, Tsito, Aflao, etc., and Kpandu for Kpandu, Peki, Hohoe, etc. For the Western RABA, Sekondi-Takoradi was to organise clubs in Sekondi, Takoradi, etc. and Tarkwa for clubs in Tarkwa, Aboso, Awaso, etc.; Cape Coast was to be responsible for clubs in Cape Coast, Ankafu, Elmina, Agona Swedru, Anomabu, etc. Within the Ashanti (Asante) RABA, the Kumasi DABA was to supervise clubs in Kumasi, Obuasi, Mampong, Konongo, etc., and the Brong Ahafo DABA was to be in charge of clubs in Sunyani, Bechem, Berekum, Dormaa Ahenkro, Teppa, Ahafo-Mem, Wenchi, etc. For the Northern RABA, Tamale was to cater for Tamale, Yendi, Damango, Pong-Tamale, etc. and Bawku was to be responsible for clubs in Bawku, Bolgatanga, Navorongo, Pusiga, etc. For the Accra RABA, the Accra Proper DABA., was to cater for Ga-Mashie, Osu, Labadi, Adabraka, etc., and the Tema DABA was to do the same for clubs in Tema and its environs.

For the sake of uniformity, all clubs were to be designated as Amateur Boxing Clubs, for example, Suhum Amateur Boxing Club. A designation like Tamale School of Boxing gave the impression that the latter was professionally inclined (PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/24).⁵² Hence, from the latter part of 1959, many boxing groups bearing definite and descriptive names qualified them with the suggested designation.

The report suggested that the GABA needed to be re-organised to remove some of its inefficiencies in governing and promoting boxing. Certain guiding principles were recommended for the re-organisation. These included the rule of decentralisation and the compilation of a rule-book containing the stated aims and objectives of the GABA, constitution of the governing bodies and terms of reference. The GABA followed the principles and re-organised before sending the Black Bombers to the Olympics in 1960.

A further recommendation was that a national body (derived from the GABA) responsible to the Sports Council should be (re)established. The two were to oversee the organisation of all national and international tournaments, etc., and deal with problems at the national level. The recommendation included the partitioning of the country into boxing regions to govern the sport and assist the National Council and the sub-Council and committees in the various districts and towns. These bodies were to ensure that amateur clubs affiliated to the regional body and the National Council. The regions were to have their own Regional Councils with the right to elect their members to represent them at the National Council. They were to foster the true spirit of amateur boxing, ensure the welfare of all concerned with the sport in their regions, and be responsible to the National Council and the GABA for the good conduct, administration, organisation and control of all amateur boxing activities in



their sectors. They were to ensure that all members who competed in any tournament organised under their jurisdiction were members of an affiliated club.⁵³ Consequently, from 1959, most of the regional championships, particularly those intended to shape the national team, were organised by the councils with the mandate of the GABA.

The report also recommended the establishment of Club Management Committees by Regional Committees mandated to organise inter-club matches. Area and town committees, which had been quickly established, should be mandated to engender the true spirit of amateur boxing and stimulate active interest in it within their locality by organising frequent boxing contests and assisting clubs to run their own tournaments. They were to be responsible to their Regional Councils for good conduct, organisation, administration and control of all amateur boxing activities in their zone. Furthermore, they were to ensure that clubs affiliated to the national body through their Regional Councils, and to protect the interests of all concerning the sport in their zone.

While the coaches and the GABA pursued the arrangements that the report prescribed, they prepared the Olympic team. Even though the COS supported the reformation and building of a team exercise, it proved inadequate. Necessary preliminary activities like the Individual Championship grappled with financial and logistic problems. The GABA still depended on private benefactors for basics such as trophies, even in 1960. Some of the benefactors withdrew their benevolence. For example, Aspro-Nicholas Limited disclosed to the GABA that it could no longer support the 1959/1960 boxing contest enterprise (PRAAD RG.9/1/23).⁵⁴ However, Parkinson and Howard Limited donated £5.00 in March 1960 to support the GABA to organise the preparatory bouts (PRAAD RG.9/1/23).⁵⁵ Ultimately, the GABA drew funds from its shallow treasury and registration fees from fighters, and contributions from regional associations and some private donors including the Accra Brewery, and staged the Individual Championship at the Accra Community Centre Boxing Arena in April 1960. The competition invited government dignitaries including Mr Krobo Edusei, one of Kwame Nkrumah's close confidants, into its spectators (PRAAD RG.9/1/23),⁵⁶ and was generally well attended.

The Olympic team included the flyweight Isaac 'Cassius' Aryee, featherweight Eddie Blay, middleweight Braimah Alhassan, lightweight Adjarnoh, bantamweight Joshua Williams, light-welterweight Ike Quartey, welterweight Nyarko Tetteh, light-middleweight Joseph Lartey, and light-heavyweight Jojo Myles. A preliminary international boxing exposure through pre-Olympic friendly boxing contests and educational tours in Egypt, where Fathia, the wife of Kwame Nkrumah came from, and Switzerland, was prepared for the team. The GABA succeeded in getting the Egyptian and Swiss governments to pay a significant portion of the cost of preparation and travel allowances. The rest of the budget to cover other expenses,

which stood at G. £853 Ghanaian pounds, was borne by the Ghana government (PRAAD RG.9/1/23).⁵⁷ The pre-Olympic boxing tour started on July 12, 1960, with contests in Cairo, Zurich and Basel. The team performed admirably and gained adequate experience for the task in Rome. Meanwhile, in August 1960, the GABA nominated one of its referees, Mr G.W. Amarteifio, to take an international course and examination for credence to go to Rome on September 14 and assist supervision of the Games. His nomination honoured an invitation which the International Boxing Association (AIBA) made in April 1960 (PRAAD RG.9/1/24)⁵⁸ as part of its contribution to the efforts of the GABA to enhance the promising boxing culture in Ghana.

The Black Bombers fought gallantly in Rome. Jack Roy supported Roy Ankrah, who had been made head coach by the Ghana Parliament (Vieta 1990, 574), with technical counsel. His appointment came from the government's conviction that a Ghanaian was ready to lead the team. Ike Quartey won a silver medal in the welterweight division, a decoration which for some time remained Ghana's highest Olympic medal. Even though Ghana boxing made that good mark at the Olympics, it continued to struggle to develop at the domestic level. Upon independence in 1957, it was apparent that the country was brimming with boxing talent and potential. The Roy Ankrah legend and its effects, and the promising bright future of boxing in sports and nation-building were good justifications for the government to select boxing for development (Vieta 1990, 561). However, it was football (Vieta 1990, 561) that received much funding and logistical attention from the COS. Football, the pet sport of Kwame Nkrumah and his government for nation-building and Pan Africanism (Darby 2013, 221–246), drew maximum attention and support from the government to the peril of boxing.⁵⁹ This bias has not abated. This study opines that it was Nkrumah's personal interest in football that engineered the bias against boxing, a situation of inequity in favour of football which did not change during subsequent regimes.

Even if football is currently the most popular sport, the so-called 'Passion of the Nation', it is evident that boxing has impressively brought numerous international laurels of victory and esteem to Ghana. Unlike football, boxing continued to develop mainly through its own efforts. After 1960, amateur boxing still survived largely on the initiatives of the under-funded GABA, benevolence of the corporate world and determined amateurs who, regardless of inadequate resources, produced some renowned champions (Ohene Karikari, pers. comm., February 6, 2009). Governments have continued to focus more on football to the disadvantage of boxing. As reported in 2008 by a document from the GABA, amateur boxing in Ghana, regardless of its potential and the good image and reputation of its champions in the past, 'has descended to its lowest ebbs [sic] and it is important that it is put back unto the pinnacle where it once belong [sic]' (Ghana Amateur Boxing Association, n.d., 1).



With the GABA unable to adequately fund amateur boxing and provide enough facilities for clubs, many clubs, since 1960, have been left to their own survival devices. Significant government intervention came only when international engagements like Olympics and Commonwealth Games were imminent. Ohene Karikari expressed the view that this 'support of convenience' was still a common trend in the first decades of the twenty-first century. In addition, constructive necessities such as refresher courses for coaches and inter-club competitions have occurred largely through the GABA's initiatives and devices of sponsorship.

Despite its seeming facility-anaemic domestic scene, the country, through determined boxers, has exhibited some highly talented amateur and professional boxing after the 1960 Olympics. Since then it has produced international-level professional champions and laureates at amateur competitions. In 1962, the Black Bombers won four silver and three bronze medals at the All-Africa Games in Cairo, Egypt. During the 1962 Commonwealth Games at Perth, it showed class by winning two gold and four silver medals. Ghana was recognised and given the honour as 'the best boxing nation in the Commonwealth' (Vieta 1990, 575). Incidentally, the country's international fame as a determined independent African nation state with a Pan Africanist orientation and boxing potential attracted Muhammad Ali. The legend visited in May 1964 (Early 2002, 12) and was officially received by Nkrumah.

He received a mighty welcome from the masses and tremendous coverage from the media (Early 2002, 12). Certainly, the physical manifestation of his legend, charisma and exhibition fights in Accra and Kumasi, and his public appearances, which attracted a great deal of attention, sharpened popular interest in boxing and honed the aspirations of local boxers, especially among budding amateurs and established professionals in Accra. Later, in October 1964 at the Tokyo Olympics, Ghana won a bronze medal through Eddie Blay. Furthermore, in Kingston during the 1966 Commonwealth Games Ghana impressively won three gold and two silver medals.

Evidently, despite the paucity of standard equipment and inadequate government financial commitment, it was the tenacity of Ghana's amateur boxers that produced these medallists. They became laureates because of their determination to use skills and brawn to acquire fame, bring glory to Ghana, and, for some, eventually employ this 'culture of bruising' as a profession to make money for personal and social improvement. Regional associations continued the battle for existence. Because of a lack of funds and equipment, they could not become vibrant in the organisation of regional competitions and attraction of more clubs. School-based boxing also waned and currently it literally does not exist. Even in tertiary institutions, such as the University of Cape Coast, where bachelor and postgraduate degree programmes in Health and Physical Education and Recreation are offered, boxing is considered

only in theory. The lack of equipment has prevented its practical side being taught.

Clearly, Accra's pre-eminence as the hotbed of boxing from the 1960s was sustained by the presence in Accra of most of the big companies and corporate firms, many of which the regional association and clubs could rely on for sponsorship for championships and development. That advantage, besides the historical rootedness of Accra in boxing, explains why over the years many non-Ga boxers from other regions have moved to Accra, which, despite the so-called decentralisation and re-organisation exercise of 1959, has remained the citadel of the sport.

After 1966, the country's fortune on the international amateur competitive scene started to wane. The Black Bombers were unable to sustain their early drive for laurels. In 1972, the Olympic squad, featuring Roy Ankrah as coach, Alhassan Braimah as assistant coach, and boxers such as light middleweight Ricky Bannor, welterweight Flash Emma and middleweight Prince Amartay, won a bronze medal in the middleweight division. Few other laurels were obtained in the 1970s by the Black Bombers at continental and international contests. I shall return to discuss this in the next chapter.

Nevertheless, the professional level of Ghana boxing started to make gains again in the 1970s. Most of the coveted laurels that came to Ghanaian boxing from the mid 1970s to the first decade of the twenty-first century came from professional exploits. The individualised nature of boxing at the professional level and the huge prize money that a boxer and promoter(s) could easily make from good deals and victory were generally responsible. Motivated by Colonel I.K. Acheampong, who liked sports (Vieta 1990, 582), D.K. Poison, whose professional career started around 1966, claimed the first professional world title in 1975. To date, the Sport Decree SMCD 54, issued in 1976 by Colonel I.K. Acheampong, Head of State of Ghana and Chairman of the Supreme Military Council (SMC), to restructure and re-organise amateur and professional boxing, among other tasks, has not effectively succeeded in revamping amateur boxing in the country.

The Sports Decree SMCD 54 established a National Sports Council to promote the organisation and development of sports in Ghana, and co-ordinate and integrate all efforts to raise the standard of performance in amateur and professional sports (Ghana *Sport Decree*, 1976, Part I to Part III). The Council was also authorised to promote sports associations, encourage research into sports, and raise funds to perform its function of overseeing sports in Ghana (Ghana *Sport Decree*, 1976, Part VII). On boxing, the Decree dissolved the Sports Council of Ghana Decree, 1969 (NLCD 330) and the Ghana Boxing Board of Control Decree, 1969 (NLCD 362). Property, liabilities and employees of the two bodies were brought under the National Sports Council in the Ministry of Sports (Ghana *Sport Decree*, 1976, Part VIII, No. 44). The establishment of district and regional amateur and professional



boxing associations was authorised. Under the Sport Regulation, 1976 – L.I. 1088 section of the Decree, amateur boxing was placed under the Ghana Amateur Boxing Association (the GABA), and a body called the Ghana Boxing Authority or ‘the Authority’ (the GBA), with the status of a national professional association and subjected to Sports Decree of 1976 SMCD 54, was put in charge of professional boxing.

Subsequently, ‘the Authority’ made and applied rules and regulations, linked Ghanaian boxing with the continental and world boxing regulatory bodies, maintained records of promoters, managers and other officials, sanctioned promotions involving Ghanaian boxers, and issued ratings. It also managed some boxers and arranged for some training facilities.

Despite the intention with the decree to enhance it, ‘the progress of amateur boxing, since the mid 1970s, continued to be unimpressive and remained so’ (Ohene Karikari, pers. comm., February 6, 2009). This situation was unsatisfactory to Eddie Blay, the veteran Ghanaian boxer and Olympic medallist. In 1980, he lamented in an article, entitled ‘What’s wrong with Boxing?’, about what he perceived as an ongoing general decline in the growth and efficacy of amateur boxing, which he attributed to factors such as the hasty transition of amateur boxers to the professional stage and a lack of adequate support and innovative and effective policies from the state (*DG*, February 16, 1980, 14). The GABA has attributed this stalling to the traditional factors which had plagued the sports since 1957 (Ohene Karikari, pers. comm., February 6, 2009; Patrick Anyidoho, pers. comm., February 6, 2009). These customary weaknesses in amateur boxing facilitated the premature transition of boxers from ‘what they saw to be the unexciting chore of amateurism’ to professionalism (Godwin Nii Dzani Kotey, pers. comm., February 19, 2009). The ubiquity of hasty transitions further sapped potential at the amateur base (Ofori Asare, pers. comm., February 20, 2009). Then again, this transition enriched the ranks of professional boxing, which produced a good number of talented international boxing champions for Ghana (Rashidi Williams, pers. comm., February 20, 2009).

Such champions, mostly indigenes of Ga-Mashie or with boxing relations with Ga-Mashie, have demonstrated great skill and determination in their discipline. Bukom, the unchallenged ‘Mecca of Ghanaian boxing’, has generated most of these champions. The line of venerable champions who have emanated directly from Accra, particularly Bukom, or indirectly gained the boons of training in Bukom or receiving coaching from a ‘Bukomite’ instructor includes Floyd Klutei Robertson. Robertson was originally a footballer, but the popularity of boxing among his people attracted him. He became the Commonwealth featherweight champion in 1960. In 1964, he was promoted by Justice D.F. Annan, who hailed from Bukom (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 31) and became legal adviser to the Board of Ghana Boxing Promotion

Council (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 4), to engage in Ghana's first world championship fight in Accra. However, because of bad officiating, Robertson failed to capture the WBC featherweight title in the contest with Sugar Ramos.⁶⁰ About a decade later, on September 21, 1975, D.K. Poison defeated the Mexican boxer Rueben Olivares, the WBC featherweight champion, at the Forum, Los Angeles. Poison, whose father was from Asere Jorshie (Djornshie) in Ga-Mashie, added his inspiring accomplishment as world champion to the boxing fame of Ga-Mashie.⁶¹

This boxing milieu of Ga-Mashie nurtured and inspired Azumah Nelson to strive to become the second Ghanaian to capture a WBC championship title. Others who were inspired by that boxing milieu and history to become world champions included Nana Yaw Konadu, Ike 'Bazooka' Quartey, who defeated Espana Crisanto of Peru on June 4, 1994 to become the WBA World welterweight champion, and Alfred 'Cobra' Kotey, who on July 30, 1994 defeated Puerto Rican Rafael Del Valle to become the WBO bantamweight champion. Alex 'Ali' Baba became the WBC International flyweight champion in 1996, and during the first decade of the twenty-first century Joseph 'King Kong' Agbeko captured the WBF and the IBF bantamweight titles, respectively. While acknowledging the massive contributions of numerous enthusiasts to the sport, it must be noted that the dominance of the Ga, especially the Ga-Mashie, in Ghanaian boxing is undeniable.

Boxing has contributed in diverse ways to social and cultural growth in Ghana. Its social importance cannot be overrated. Azumah Nelson's boxer life and career, which occupy a major place in Ghanaian boxing and the history of popular culture, testify to this fact. The next chapter examines the origins, and formative years – childhood days, adolescence, life as an amateur boxer, and transition into professionalism – of this boxing legend.

Notes

- 1 This was when the Ga people succeeded in using their military alliance with the Akyem (Akim) and Akwapem (Akwapim) states to overthrow the dominance of the Akwamu state which had disintegrated the old polity of the Ga people since the second part of the seventeenth century (See Claridge 1964).
- 2 See works like Claridge (1964, 56); Reindorf (1895, 269); Law (1991, 41–42); Kea (1974, 196–197) and Kea (1982, 199) for more information on the location of Old Accra, the evolution of the Ga-Mashie state, its economy and relations with its neighbours, especially the Akan, and dealings with the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Swedish, English and Dutch commercial and imperial activities that reconfigured the politics and economy of the Ga state in general and configured Ga-Mashie into an economically powerful littoral community.
- 3 Other major member states or seaside towns that constitute the larger Ga ethnic group are Osu, La (Labadi), Teshie, Nungua and Tema.



- 4 A Fante equivalent was *Kanka*. The Twi term for Dutch Accra was/is Nkran Kankan. Its inhabitants, particularly the Dutch, were called Kanka, Kinka, Kenka or Ginga (Christaller 1933, 226).
- 5 The Osu (Christiansborg), La (Labadi), Teshie, Nungua and Tema units maintained their distinct political identities and independence from the Ga-Mashie polity.
- 6 Non-Ga ethnic elements like Fante immigrant fishermen, Akwamu immigrant traders, and Nigerian artisans and slaves known as Alata who were brought there by the English contributed to the social formation and ethnic composition of those sections. The Alata, Abola and Otublohum sections received significant numbers of Nigerians, Fante and Akwamu respectively.
- 7 The word evolves from the Portuguese root word *cabeceiro*. It approximates 'boss' or 'headman'.
- 8 Women were deemed not on a par with men. This view was conveyed through the customary metaphorical designation of women as *abekuloi* which, translating as 'left-handed people,' meant that they were existential peripherals and subordinate ancillaries to men just as the left-hand was to the right-hand in Ga worldview. Yet, as Kilson has illustrated, despite this seeming 'jurally subordinate position to men,' Ga women '[had and still] have considerable social autonomy and acquire influence through their maternal roles' (See Kilson 1971, 173; Kilson 2013, 83).
- 9 Yakor Chavez has become a referee and trainer at the Wisdom Boxing Gym in Accra (Rashidi Williams, pers. comm., February 20, 2009). Williams started training boxers in the 1980s. For some information about Yakor Chavez, see *The Fighting Spirit*, c.2007.
- 10 The 'Square', which continues to be a vibrant base of traditional cultural exchanges and activities, local football matches and a pulsating night life, is also the main hub for political rallies and hustings in Central Accra during national (Ghanaian) and local elections and political campaigns.
- 11 It is believed that *agbe* was introduced by repatriated free 'Afro-Brazilians' who from 1829 settled in Ga-Mashie.
- 12 This area, comprising Ussher Town, is an electoral constituency – Odododiodio – in Ghana. The name, which is the formal call for *asafo atwele* challenge, alludes to the area's status as a historical citadel of *asafo atwele* and volatile radical urban politics of the 1920s and 1930s.
- 13 *Kotoku* (pl. *kotokui*), similar to the Twi *kotokuo*, can be literally construed as 'bag' or 'sack'. (*A*)*kotoku* (sack), became the Ga term for modern boxing because of the sack-like form and bag-like nature of the gloves the sport accommodated. The gloves were shaped and acted like 'bags/sacks for the fists' (*atwele*). Dressing gloves, including stockings, especially for ladies, are known in Ga as *kausuu*, from the Dutch *kous*. See Kropp Dakubu (1999, 79).
- 14 Several economic factors including excessive stock-market speculation in the US that resulted in the 1929 Stock Market Crash and a monumental decline in spending which led to a decline in production coalesced to bring the depression into existence. The depression started in the US, but quickly turned into a global economic slump because of the strong relationship that the US had forged between itself and European economies, including Britain, after the First World War. The US was the major creditor and financier of post-

war Europe, which had countries that had colonies around the world. The economies of the colonies were tied to that of Europe. Thus, when the American economy slumped and the flow of American investment credits to Europe dried up, economic hardships emerged in Europe and dependent colonies and economies around the world. Accordingly, Gold Coast suffered economically.

- 15 This newspaper was founded in the 1950s. From about the beginning of 1983 to December 31, 1993 it was known as *People's Daily Graphic* (PDG). It became *Daily Graphic* (DG) in 1994 between January 1 and 3. In the context of this study, the name *Daily Graphic* (DG) is used when reference is made to the newspaper and articles it carried before the change of name in 1983. It is also used to cover references from the newspaper when it became *Daily Graphic* after 1993. All references that are made to the newspaper from the time its name was changed around 1983 to January 1, 1994 carry the name PDG.
- 16 The Charleston was an African-American dance, which was in vogue in the 1920s.
- 17 Born in 1832 in Accra, he was the third son of Honourable James Bannerman who was of African and British (Scottish) parentage. James Bannerman became the Lieutenant Governor of British Settlements in Gold Coast in 1850. Edmund's mother was Yaa Hom (Yahoon), daughter of the paramount chief of Asante, Asantehene Osei Yaw Akoto. Edmund attended public schools in England and returned to Gold Coast and became a renowned journalist, editor, solicitor and a man of public affairs. Popularly known as the 'Boss of Tarkwa' or 'B of T' after his imposing Jamestown residence, Tarqua(h) (Tarkwa) House, he became popular with the Ga people for his agitation against policies of the colonial regime.
- 18 For example, see Kimble (1963) and 'Edmund Bannerman (1832–1903)' in Ephson (1969, 78–81).
- 19 Robinson won the world middleweight title five times. He retired with 175 victories in about 202 professional fights.
- 20 During the interview, at Believer's Gym, there were about 15 boxers, mostly from Ga-Mashie, at training. They sparred under a tree and on a cement concrete floor, had one punching bag and about six old car tyres which they used for jumping exercises. They disclosed that the early boxing heroes inspired them to use boxing for self and community improvement.
- 21 Abarry's interpretation of the original in Ga. See Abarry (1984, 495). See also Emmanuel Akyeampong's version (2002, 57).
- 22 See letter with reference number SC/OB/68.
- 23 PRAAD, Accra RG. 9/1/10, Letter from Organiser to the Gold Coast Amateur Sports Council (GCASC), Accra, 1952.
- 24 See document dated 26-11-1952, and captioned 'C.Y.O. Sports Stadium, Nsawam.'
- 25 Trans-Volta Togoland Region – File. See letter from Albert K. Ekudi to Acting Secretary of the Trans-Volta Togoland Amateur Boxing Association dated 18/2/57.
- 26 For information on the Development Plan and the mentor-mentee governmental relationship between the colonial government and the CPP government from 1951 to 1957, see Webster, Boahen, and Tidy (1980, 290–297).



- 27 Noteworthy, Ghana remained without a boxing stadium until 2016 when President John Dramani Mahama's government commissioned the Bukom Boxing Arena as part of the Trust Sports Emporium in Bukom. The building of the ultra-modern sports stadium complex which has a 4000-seater open air arena was financed by the state-owned Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT).
- 28 See Trans-Volta Togoland Region – File.
- 29 See Trans-Volta Togoland Region – File, Letter 3220, dated October 22, 1956, from the Honourable Secretary to boxing enthusiasts.
- 30 See Trans-Volta Togoland Region – File, Letter dated February 6, 1957, from Welfare Officer, Department of Social Welfare and Community Development in Ho to L.G. Stratford.
- 31 This was mentioned in a letter from L.G. Stratford to the Secretary, GCABA. See PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/13 GCABA. Trans-Volta Togoland Region – File.
- 32 See Programme Brochure, *National Individual Championships* (1958, 3).
- 33 PRAAD Accra GABA File, RG.9/1/31. Re-organisation of Regional Associations Boxing letter from the GABA to Regional Associations dated 13-06-1959. Reference number GABA/G.I./14/13.
- 34 As a tradition, national teams for men and women at the various age levels, such as the under-17 and under-20 teams bear names like 'Black Starlets' and 'Black Satellites'. Others are the 'Black Meteors', 'Black Maidens' and 'Black Queens'.
- 35 See letter written by Lt Col. L.G. Young, Chairman of the National Council of the GABA to the Regional Sports Officers, Secretary of Ministry of Education, Ghana Amateur Sports Council, etc.
- 36 Letter written by Lt Col. L.G. Young and dated January 22, 1958.
- 37 Letter (BCI/6), dated February 26, 1958, from J.R. Houston to Major General V. Parley (GOC) Ghana Army.
- 38 Letter (TVTR./23) from J.R. Houston to Regional Clubs dated February 26, 1958.
- 39 These are indicated on the GABA Boxing National Individual Championships poster of 1958, and in the Programme Brochure, *National Individual Championships*. See PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/23.
- 40 Letter (AR. 59), the GABA, dated May 05, 1958.
- 41 Ghana Olympic Association (GABA/GOA.2/SF.2), Report by R.A. Jewkes, (AAA. Honorary Senior Coach).
- 42 Letter from Ashanti Regional Amateur Boxing Association to the GABA, dated June 26, 1959.
- 43 Letter from H.B. Dadzie to the GABA, dated July 09, 1959.
- 44 Letter from the Northern Region Amateur Boxing Association to the GABA, dated June 25, 1959.
- 45 Letter (GABA/LCT.16/SF.1/2) from the GABA to Regional and School clubs dated July 22, 1959.
- 46 Letter (MT. 0908/93 (9.08/59)) from the GABA to Bishop Herman Secondary School.

- 47 Letter (GABA/TVT./7.35) dated 12-08-59 from the GABA to Bishop Herman Secondary School.
- 48 Letter (AR. 59), the GABA, dated May 05, 1958.
- 49 Ghana after independence used the Ghanaian pound until July 19, 1965, when the government, for nationalist and decimalisation purposes, introduced the Cedi.
- 50 Letter from Greater Accra Regional Amateur Boxing Association to the GABA, dated July 07, 1959.
- 51 See sheet 10 of Report of the Regional Tour of the GABA in 1959.
- 52 See sheets 11 and 12 of Report of the Regional Tour of the GABA in 1959.
- 53 For the directives that were given to undergird the re-organisation project, see PRAAD Accra RG.9/1/24. See sheet 38, captioned Ghana Amateur Boxing Association – Re-Organisation, which is an addendum to the Report of the Regional Tour of the GABA in 1959.
- 54 Letter from G.S. Wilcox, Area Manager, to Charles K. Mensah Torkonoo, dated February 24, 1960.
- 55 Letter (F.S./816/AJG/D) from A.J. Granville, Director of the company, to the GABA, dated March 21, 1960.
- 56 Letter (GABA/12/208), dated March 24, 1960, from Captain G.E. Amuah, Chairman of the Accra Boxing Association, to Honourable Krobo Edusei, of the Ministry of Transport and Communication.
- 57 Letter (GABA/2/SF.2/23) from the GABA to Amateur Sports Council, dated January 25, 1960.
- 58 Ghana Olympic Association (GABA/GOA2/SF.2). Letter (GABA/2/SF.2/45) from Charles K. Mensah Torkonoo to Director of Social Welfare, dated April 21, 1960.
- 59 For more on how Nkrumah and his government developed football, see Vieta (1990, 566, 568).
- 60 For more on Floyd Klutei Robertson, see Vieta (1990, 576–579).
- 61 For more on D.K. Poison, see Dadzie and Ahwoi (2010, 580–585).



3

Origins? ‘I am the son of my people’

Non est ad astra mollis e terris via

(‘The road from the earth to the stars is not easy’).

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Roman Philosopher, c.3 BCE – CE 65.

Most of Ghana’s illustrious sports personalities, especially boxers, emerged from relatively underprivileged families and the peripheries of urbanised geographical spaces. They have contributed in diverse ways to the socioeconomic growth of their communities.

Azumah Nelson stands in postcolonial Ghana’s history of boxing as one of the great boxers of all time. For over a decade he reigned supreme in the international category of featherweights. Peripherally linked to a noble ancestral household in Ga-Mashie through his paternal blood lineage, he did not grow up as an aristocrat. His days as a youth and his social background were decidedly non-regal.

As a toddler and adolescent, he grew up in harsh economic conditions, which stifled and hindered his academic pursuits. This ultimately compelled him to make a career out of his hobby – boxing – expecting economic leverage and social affluence. He spent about 19 years of his life in the art, sport and career of boxing as a professional. Boxing transformed him into a national Ghanaian hero and an international legend. The saga of his iconic persona, life and career is inspiring. His life depicts determination; his career an epitome of success. As an individual, he has contributed tangibly to social growth and the advancement of socially deprived elements. Of his collection of boxing-oriented aliases, two are popular: Champ and ‘Professor’.¹ Henceforth, he is interchangeably referred to as Champ, Professor or Azumah Nelson.

The beginning

The opening words of the first interview that Champ granted for this book at his residence in the vicinity of ‘Azumah Nelson’ in New Achimota, Accra were: ‘Before I

say anything about me, I want you to know that I come from a humble background and I am proud of that background'. He added:

My roots toughened me and gave me direction to grow. It is the beginning of my life and career. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

Modestly dressed in a black cotton tee-shirt, a pair of faded blue-jeans trousers, and a pair of black leather moccasins, and sitting on a sofa, he smiled seraphically and made an epiphanic statement: '*Mi Tabonnyobi. Mi Ga-Mashinyobi*' (literally, 'I am a child of Tabon and Ga-Mashie. I am the son of my people'). This proud succinct statement revealed his knowledge of his Afro-Brazilian ancestry and Ga-Mashie roots. According to Alhaji Tawfiq, a boxing promoter and Champ's friend,

when Champ emerged strongly on the international boxing scene in the 1980s, many people thought that he was from the Northern part of the country. ... [T]hey were misled by his name Azumah, which sounded like the Northern household name Asuma ... Champ is from Ga-Mashie, with [a tinge of Afro-Brazilian [ancestry] in him. (pers. comm., February 20, 2009)

Other people in Ga-Mashie who have memories about their Ga-Brazilian ethnicity and roots proudly assert them vocally. For example, 'I am a daughter of Tabon' was how Christiana Lartey, an official flag and standard bearer of the Tabon Mantse and people during indigenous durbars and functions in Ga-Mashie, proudly asserted her identity to me at her residence in 'Brazil House' on September 9, 2009. This Brazil House,² near Brazil Street, close to the seafront of Otublohum where the colonial Accra Port once stood (Christiana Lartey, pers. comm., September 9, 2009), is one of the early structures constructed by the Tabon. Mahama Nassu built it. 'My ancestors ... from Brazil ... came to Accra, [demographically] mixed, [culturally] integrated and became members of Ga-Mashie. I am [a] Tabon and a daughter of Ga-Mashie', Christiana Lartey added.

Although the Tabon are Ga-Mashie *manbii*, many have the view that their general genealogical tree extensively includes Afro-Brazilians who did not repatriate from Brazil to Africa (Christiana Lartey, pers. comm., September 9, 2009). Although they are legal Ga-Mashie citizens and nationals of Ghana, they are aware of and not in the least dismissive of their Afro-Brazilian genealogy. The preservation of such genealogical awareness and historical knowledge evolves from an imperative and powerful sense of history. This aims at conserving among them a pro-history and cultural consciousness of and about their relationship with the historical developments of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, which developed an African Diaspora and a cultural Black Atlantic³ in Brazil and West Africa. Although a few have a smattering of Lusophonic capabilities, the present population generally speaks no Portuguese at all. Nevertheless, most of them assert that their Brazilian ancestry continues to



fertilise the memory of their historical past and acknowledge their contribution, accomplishments and place in that past for the present generation and posterity of Tabon (Christiana Lartey, pers. comm., September 9, 2009). Thus, while they overtly appear culturally distinctly Ga and nationally uniquely Ghanaian, any Tabon who carries this memory also psychologically preserves a degree of historical awareness of his or her Afro-Brazilian past.

Hence, Josafath Fortunato Antonio Nelson, the son of the then mantse of Tabon, Nii Azumah III, disclosed to the Brazilian Ambassador Raimundo Souza Dantas who visited the Tabon in 1961 that:

[N]one of us here present [Tabon citizens of Accra] have ever visited Brazil but ... we [Tabon citizenry] continue [even though we have culturally become and geographically been designated as Ga and Ghanaians] to consider Brazil as our mother country ... ('Nii Azumah III and Nii Azumah IV', Brazil House, Accra; Schaumloeffel 2007, 63)

Forty-eight years down the line, Champ also referred to that ancestry as he spoke about his ethnic identity, which cradled and nurtured his being, adulthood and career within certain compelling socio-political influences and enhancing cultural forces in the context of his Ga-Mashie roots and sociocultural environment.

Azumah Nelson: Birth and childhood days

Champ's childhood and youth were eventful. Like any other growing boy in the urbanising Central Accra, he engaged in various pastimes and events. His formative years, from the late 1950s to the first half of the 1970s, did not signal a future different from many other Ga children in Ussher Town and Jamestown: fishing, petty trading or small-scale indigenous craft industries like blacksmithing, wood carving, canoe making, and boxing.

These two renowned citadels of Ghana boxing – Ussher Town and Jamestown – were troubled by woes such as over-population, which strained the few available social amenities. During the 1960s the economy of these fraternal areas in 'downtown Accra' suffered from the relocation of one major source of employment and capital for some of the indigenes, especially the youth. The wharf there, which served the maritime trade of Gold Coast, was relocated to Tema. Even when the Takoradi deep-water port was constructed and opened c.1928, this Accra wharf provided significant maritime commercial services to the country and remained a principal link to the global economy.

Even though the transformation of Accra into a colonial capital inspired some of the wealthier inhabitants of the two centres to emigrate to new suburbs, overpopulated 'downtown Accra', like old mercantile maritime epicentres and port cities such as

Lagos, Douala and Mombasa, thrived as a vibrant conservatory of indigenous culture and political intrigue. As the dynamism of Ga urban culture continued and indigenous Jamestown and Ussher Town endeavoured to preserve local spatial, social and institutional integrity, and remain the focus of Ga political action and social life in sprawling Accra, Ga-Mashie remained an African 'town' in character. The port generated local income and employment for some of the indigenes of Ga-Mashie to work in various capacities such as canoe men (canoeists), stevedores and porters. That source of economic livelihood remained intact until 1962 when the Convention People's Party (CPP) government opened a new port at Tema and the vibrant mercantile activities at the old wharf were relocated to the new one. Consequently, Tema sapped the commercial boons which the 'old' harbour provided Ga-Mashie. This relocation negatively affected the livelihood of many people in the two *nshonnamajii* – Jamestown and Ussher Town – of Ga-Mashie. This was a major organic contributory factor to the high rate of unemployment and economic hardship that prevailed in Ga-Mashie during Champ's childhood years.

He spent those years mainly in those two vicinities of Accra. Many Ga families and individual non-Ga families and persons there, who were products of rural-urban migration, predominantly engaged in artisanal fishing, portage at market places, petty trading, hawking or small-scale artisanship. Many of the youth were either unemployed or engaged in small-scale vocational crafts, hawking or amateur boxing. A small number of salaried civil servants of the Ghanaian state, among the adult population whose salaries catered for themselves and their families, existed. Nevertheless, the prevalence of unemployment and lack of proper and adequate social infrastructure, particularly good schools, tormented those localities with intense financial poverty and illiteracy. Hence the adults, youth and children developed diverse survival mechanisms for themselves and their families. It was common for children from the ages of six and seven to start hawking items such as fruit, vegetables, salt and fish in their neighbourhoods. Consequently, many children could hardly pursue smooth academic lives beyond the basic stage. These unfavourable socioeconomic arrangements often compelled many to suddenly stop schooling, which frequently led them to laze about or become apprentices of their parents' professions, such as fishing and petty trading. Thus, for many, particularly boys between the ages of six and seventeen, truancy and mastering of various techniques of survival on the streets defined part of their formative years within those territories. Champ was a product of such social conditions, financial deprivation and slum areas. He played truant and pursued various extra-curricular activities such as petty pilfering, hawking and fishing for survival.

Boxing attracted many adolescent and youthful males because of its historical and cultural connections with the area, and its social position as a functional and



economistic sport. Boxing's traditional attraction appealed to Champ:

[F]rom about six to seven, I entertained the [romantic] notion of becoming one great boxer in my community and beyond ... [the poise of] up-and-coming amateurs, who would jog [to the gyms] ... it was of immense attraction to me. I used to hear my elders discussing ... local boxers and international ones and the money and fame they had abroad. This also captured [and sharpened] my interest. I however, fantasised. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

Champ was neither a charismatic extrovert nor an obvious introvert from childhood to puberty. He balanced and displayed both sides to his advantage among his peers. His early formal school education was turbulent. Harsh financial constraints on his nuclear family, headed by a father who had other financial commitments, undermined the stable progress of his basic education. The unfavourable circumstances compelled him to think and undertake actions aimed at economic emancipation. Throughout his youth, he inescapably endeavoured and used diverse enterprises to make ends meet for himself and especially the nuclear family.

Born on July 19, 1958, in the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra,⁴ he started his toddlerhood as a member of the indigenous Ga *We shia* (family household) in the *blohun* (vicinity or sub-quarter) of Adedemkpo near Bukom in Ussher Accra. His parents, who were not members of the white-collar working middle-class, formally named him Samuel Azumah Nelson. His father, Emmanuel Teilo Nelson, grew up in both the Otublohum and Asere areas. Champ's grandfather domiciled in Asere in a common fashion of relocation similar to other Tabon whose search for *lebensraum* and intermarriages dispersed from Otublohum, the first base of the Afro-Brazilian returnees, to other *akutsei* in Ga-Mashie and different localities in the ever-expanding Accra. This integrated Emmanuel Teilo Nelson, whose Tabon origin extended to Otublohum, into the sociocultural sphere of cosmopolitan Asere and exposed him to boxing demonstrations and the widespread boxing culture within Bukom. He realised how difficult it was for him and many 'common' and poor people in his locality to enrol in schools to receive Western formal literacy and numeracy education. He decided to make a livelihood from boxing, but his father, a tailor, opposed his decision, so he reluctantly settled for tailoring. For his adult life Teilo Nelson engaged in small-scale tailoring, a profession that was common in the Nelson family. Many of his forebears had indulged in it since the arrival of his Afro-Brazilian ancestors in Accra.

The paternal and maternal ancestry of Azumah Nelson

Champ's paternal ancestors from Brazil re-settled in Central Accra during the first half of the nineteenth century. They belonged to repatriated groups of freed descendants of enslaved Africans to the West African coastland.⁵

The first returnees arrived aboard the *Salisbury* in Accra in 1829 (Boadi-Siaw n.d., 8). Kwaku Ankrah (sometimes spelled Ankra or Ancra), who was not the established *mantse*⁶ but a prominent and influential political figure and town 'chief'⁷ of Otublohum, whose economic leverage had made him more influential than the substantive Otublohum *mantse*,⁸ hosted them as Africans who had returned to their motherland, Africa. Ankrah, a *makelaar* (chief broker) in the coastal trade with the Dutch in Accra, and economically powerful, was possibly influenced by a Pan African spirit to accept the group. Moreover, they possessed certain skills and knowledge: joinery, good farming, carpentry, masonry, fighting techniques⁹ and tailoring, which Ankrah definitely knew were useful to the local society. Following an old Ga-Mashie custom and habit of hospitality, which in the past had allowed 'friendly outsiders' to offer military help to Ga communities (Field 1937, 2), Ankrah and the leadership of Ga-Mashie welcomed the returnees and offered them land to build homes. This customary Ga hospitality to 'stranger guests' (*gboi*) (sing. *gbo*) was commended by William Smith who, visiting Accra in 1726, noted that despite its domestic problems, the polity was 'the most courteous and civil to strangers of any on the Gold Coast' (Smith 1744, 135). Ankrah even incorporated some of the Afro-Brazilian returnees into his *weku* (family group), (pl. *wekui*), and *shia* (household). So, Ga-Mashie, which formed a composite spatial, political and kinship-based entity, had a demography which was traditionally constructed and reconstructed by the incorporation of immigrants. The Ga aphorism *Ablekuma abakuma wo* translating as 'May many other good people join us to replenish us with their service' (Boyd 2010, 217), philosophically underpinned the traditional assimilation of *gboi* (Odotei 1991, 70). When the aphorism is amplified it means 'May strangers ... join us ... with their wealth, their might, their families, their experience, their ideas and ... their gods' (Odotei 1991, 70). It sums up the ideological framework of urban expansion, demographic replenishment and balance, and socioeconomic growth through the nurturing and cultivation of useful human resources. Accordingly, the returnees merged into Ga-Mashie through Otublohum.¹⁰

After a major slave revolt in 1835 in Bahia, Brazil, about two hundred persons, comprising Catholics and Muslims, returned to Accra in 1836. Another group, led by a Muslim called Mahma Sokoto, arrived in 1836.

Ankrah settled them in Otublohum despite initial disapproval from Christian Ernst Lans, Commander of the Dutch possessions in Gold Coast (c.16 March, 1834 to c. December 2, 1836). Consequently, the settlers swore an oath of fidelity to the King of the Netherlands to officially access arable land and Dutch 'protection' (Amos and Ayesu 2002, 40). This pacification made it easier for others, including the Costa family, to arrive in 1838.

Consequently, the Tabon spread and settled in different parts of Accra (Schaumloeffel 2007, 27–28, cited in Boadi-Siaw n.d., 8). As Ga-Mashie initiated



a reconfiguration of its society through the incorporation of Tabon, it conferred the title and office of *mantse* on Kangidi Asuma[n], the leader of the premier émigrés. He received the politico-ritual object and indigenous symbol of political authority – a *sei* (wooden stool). Kangidi Asuma[n] thus became a sub(divisional)-chief under the Otublohum *mantse* from 1836 to 1865. It appears he changed his name to Azuma[h] Nelson and, as Tabon *mantse*, he adopted the stool name Nii (Chief) Azumah I. He is therefore the progenitor of the Azuma[h] (Asuma) Nelson (*weku*) family, which consequently came to accommodate the *sei* as its property. Part of Champ's paternal line is linked to the ancestral Azumah Nelson *adeboo shia* (ancestral house) that has given chiefs bearing the stool name of Azumah to Tabon.¹¹

The settling of pioneer personalities and families with names such as Adama, Aliptara, Aruna, Kangidi, Asuman [Azuma, Asumah or Azumah], Claudio and Jose Vieira,¹² and the concomitant sociology of intermarriages between their descendants and indigenes produced people like Champ's father.

When Champ's mother, Comfort Atwee Quarcoo (*Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010), a fishmonger whose father, a folk fisherman, and mother, a fishmonger, were from Teshie and Osu respectively, married Champ's father, Teilo, Ga-Mashie became her home. She was born and bred in a customary *agbonna* (compound extended family house). Her family's straitened financial circumstances prevented her from going to school. Like most females in the local *agbonna*, however, she received the customary indigenous instruction from older women and mothers about the basics of how to become ideal and economically resourceful women, mothers and wives. She learnt culinary methods, home management, and basic arithmetic for commerce and petty trade. As a maiden, Comfort gravitated to petty trading. She joined the common occupation of mongering within Ga-Mashie's indigenous economy. She bought, dried, salted, smoked and sold fish. She obtained fish from the *nshonna* (beaches) around Ga-Mashie. Her marriage to Teilo produced six children. Champ was the first. The other five children from that marriage, a marriage which had lost its verve by the time Champ was in his twenties, were Mahma Nelson, Joseph 'Sagacious' Nelson, Abieana Nelson, Louisa Nelson and Lekia Nelson. Mahma, the second child, who had been Champ's playmate, died at an early age. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, Champ admitted that Mahma's death 'was a terribly shocking incident to the family'. It saddened and frightened Champ and made him reflective about life, 'about how one day you have it and the other it is gone'. He continued:

[It] contributed to growing in me the mind[fulness] of struggling to respect people and also not talking too much [boastful].... This influenced my quiet ... [demeanour]. Looking back, it [subconsciously], apart from the [virtue of] love which Jesus Christ taught, gave me the philosophy ... that we [people] do not live forever and [so] we must ... be at peace with one another ... we must

be good, because our period here on earth is short and unpredictable ... My mother, a very strong woman, and the family however were able to move on in life, after that painful loss of Mahma ...

The cares of a large family, bringing up her biological children and those of other relatives, in an *agbonna* where she stayed in Adedemkpo near the environs of Amamomo, and housekeeping were combined with her trading activities, usually at the popular Salaga Market. She and some of her extended maternal family relatives shared the compound house near the Timber Market area. The neighbourhood was called Timber Market because of the conspicuous lumberjack activities and vibrant wood milling industry that prevailed there. Champ spent most of his toddler days in Adedemkpo and played in adjoining Amamomo and Timber Market.

Adopting a dual residential pattern, Comfort kept her Adedemkpo residence and lived intermittently with her husband in the suburb of Mamprobi. Teilo relocated to Mamprobi because of its seeming vibrant commercial strength. He lived in a small 'house', which could pass for a shack from a Brazilian *favela*, on a piece of land he inherited from his father. In contrast to Teilo's old slum environs, Mamprobi contained many luxurious apartments of the affluent and a dynamic social spectrum of rich, middle class and working class with a high purchasing power. It was surely an economically strategic place for Teilo's trade. He must have envisaged accessing a new, bigger, and more expensive *haute couture*-conscious clientele, including senior managers, public servants and office workers. His children and wife, whose fish-mongering activities sustained her residential pattern, intermittently stayed with him at Mamprobi. She obtained and prepared fish for sale at her old home. Her dual living arrangements kept her and the children in touch with relatives within the Adedemkpo/Timber Market locales. They often stayed for extended periods in the compound house popularly known as Cassava House in Timber Market, without Teilo. The short stays at Mamprobi and the long ones spent at Timber Market suggest that Champ's formative years, from toddlerhood to puberty, were mostly spent in the shanty environs of Timber Market.

Azumah Nelson's adolescence and gravitation towards boxing

Champ largely grew up under the watchful eye of his cheerful and mild-tempered mother who had a gift for bringing up children. His father for the most part did tailoring in a different part of the city. Thrifty and methodical, she worked hard to support her family. Champ's mother became the main immediate caterer and provider for her children. Consequently, he did not really have a lot of the normal day-to-day coaching that fathers often gave to sons. Time spent with the father occurred mainly



during short weekends, times when Comfort stayed with her husband, and holidays. He joined his father in the tailoring shop, performed some chores and ran errands for him, and informally imbibed some tailoring basics such as threading sewing needles, stitching and knitting. 'I did not become a tailor, but ... I can thread a needle and do some cutting today ... [k]now [think] that God ordained that I would be a boxer' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009).

Champ claimed he had a natural knowledge of God, even when he was a child. Divine Providence (God, i.e. the Christian God, Jehovah), in his view, predestined his upbringing to be difficult so that it would ultimately pave the way to his achievement in sports and fame in life. It engineered his boxing career and success. The disheartening and disenchanting socioeconomic conditions of the environment within which he predominantly grew up gave him little confidence in human strength without divine intervention and thus changing that deplorable situation. This inclined him not to expect any earthly messiah, or entertain thoughts of relying on human power, devoid of the hand of Providence, to bring positive changes in the lives of individuals and societies. The idea that supernatural intervention, i.e. God's power and assistance, was necessary for engineering positive changes in the socioeconomic plight of his people, family and himself, therefore reigned supreme in his psyche as he, a struggling youth, reflected on the issue of societal and personal improvement. Additionally, his father, an Anglican who also worshipped with an independent African Christian denomination as a member and lay preacher, often took his son to church, particularly the latter, whenever they were together. The Afro-centric denomination had a strong penchant and belief that faith, miracles and divine interventions were imperatives for the prosperity of individuals and groups. Champ cultivated an early and strong lifelong love for Christianity and a psyche and conviction that with God's help every positive human desire could be achieved.

He psychologically and emotionally nurtured a strong confidence in God and 'His son' Jesus Christ as, he recalled, 'keys to success and positive change in all spheres of life including mine' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). This strong conviction guided and gave him a confident sense of physical and spiritual security, which equipped him, during his active years as a boxer, with the psychological fortitude to fight and fight well and be focused in his career. Nevertheless, physical training also aided his career successes. Accordingly, he disclosed that:

I always went into the ring with God ... God was always with ... my life ... His words ... regarding my life were true. His promises ... have been unfolding ... He ... told me when I was a child that He would make me a great and famous person. When I started boxing, He told me, and you know I can hear His voice when He talks to me, that He would make me a great world champion. I told my friends. They laughed, but He was true to his promise. I always went to the

ring, after training, with confidence and faith and these produced my successes and victories. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He added:

Whenever I lost a match, I knew that it had been allowed by God. I am no longer a boxer because the part of my life which God gave me to use to box is over. He has fulfilled his promise. I have become famous and economically better.

We cannot verify such claims of clairaudience and test the potency of the messages as divine agencies to his successes and remarkable boxing career. However, the strong belief in Providence and physical training and tact gave him mental strength and confidence – essential for success in every human endeavour – to win fights and face defeats with strength, and realise an accomplished career.

Champ's memories of his toddler days are scattered and innocuous as any child's. He recollects seeing his father making garments, and he (Champ) following his mum to buy and sell fish.

From the age of nine to approximately fifteen, he was enrolled in school. He attended a local primary school near the Djufor Djaanor (Tuesday Market) near Mamprobi, and later enrolled at the Mamprobi Sempe Number 2 Middle School. He liked school, yet domestic financial difficulties, which made him take up non-academic tasks to scratch a living for his family, diminished that interest.

His father's business was not flourishing; his mother had several dependents to feed. She was thus unable to provide readily all the required financial support and basic items to support his schooling. As a young schoolboy with a nimble, inquisitive mind, he sharpened his industriousness and survival instincts. He developed a serious attitude towards activities that he deemed financially rewarding and pro-survival. Like other children in his deprived community, he performed menial jobs in the morning or afternoon.

Most children [here] often worked mainly on the beach to support their families. When fish was in season, [they] help[ed] the fishermen carry their catch home ... before ... school, or ... when they had returned from school. The[y] ... create a kind of 'balloon' with a cloth ... to hold ... the fish they carried. Some also carried baskets of fish. [W]e, including Champ, also engaged in this lifestyle. We added the few fish that we got to the ones which fishermen gave us and sold them. In the case where this ... was completed in the morning some ... children went to collect newspapers to sell before going to school. (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009)

Champ, like other truants and fish-searching children, hustled, ran errands, hauled nets and toiled at the *nshonna*. He sold his fish to support his family's purse.



Increasingly, the idea of boxing for prize money formed in his mind. The strong entertainment of this notion, and ultimate decision to physically manifest it by consciously entering the sport, emanated from two main sources.

The Ga-Mashie locale within which he grew up was one. The environment in which boxing was ubiquitous – a demonstrative art and career or professional persuasion for many of its participants – nurtured in the youth the thought that boxing was a financially rewarding enterprise. Many inspired youths therefore gravitated easily to it. Champ's psyche was socially exposed to this same influence.

The other source was an incident, a match, which he experienced when he was about nine years old. It immediately inspired him to want to become a boxer to avenge a young boxer who had been beaten 'mercilessly' in that match. He disclosed that:

The desire to be a boxer [which was aroused in me] at the show never left me ... I watched this boxer, [seemingly] older in age, beat another ... [I conceived] much younger ... at Bukom. I thought the sweat on the face of the 'younger' boxer were tears ... I thought an injustice had been done. I felt that the 'older' boxer, unknowingly, they were in the same weight division, had bullied the other boxer ... I was sad and angry. I had always been against cheating and injustice and all my friends knew that. I immediately asked my father to take me to the ring to fight that older boxer [to avenge the younger one]. My father declined and said that that was not the way to go about the circumstance and show my disapproval of that fight. He then took me home because I started to cry and that was embarrassing to him. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He desired to become a boxer and one day fight that strange 'boy bully'. Regrettably, he never met that 'older villain' to box, but he kept the idea of boxing in his psyche. Regardless of the inner unhappiness that the poverty around him engendered, he '... managed to maintain ... a life which on the outside reflected happiness and light-heartedness' (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). Despite occasional spells of melancholy and introspection, he succeeded in growing up as a lively, healthy and fun-loving boy (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009).

As he progressed in age, through times of unabated economic hardship, he unceasingly pestered his father to find a boxing coach for him. He had his father's looks and inherited his mother's sociable disposition. His congenial and helpful character, and the sincere and uncomplicated way he treated his peers, both at school and at home, attracted friends to him. 'He was a tireless leader in most male children games and pastimes' (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). From the reminiscences of childhood friends and relatives, it is evident that he had a keen sense of fair play, loathed cheating, and did not hesitate to use his fists on cheaters in a game or anything that had to be shared.

From the age of 10 to 16, he gained a reputation as a good footballer and street fighter, good with his fists and at wrestling. School was pleasant enough when he attended. However, his best memories are reserved for the free times spent with his friends at home, when he was not toiling for his mother or at school.

The main group of boyhood companions who grew up with him but ultimately pursued different careers included Oblitey Kommey, alias O.B., Teddy Ayittey, also known as Las Teddy, Nii Amu Livingstone, alias Danny Livingstone, Lee Palmer Amu Quarshie and Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman, alias Franko Nero. Las Teddy and Champ led this group. The friends attended different schools, yet they pooled their skills for the group's benefit. Some mastered the practice of collecting scraps of aluminium-based objects, which they sold to recyclers. The friends did this for money and to overcome boredom. They used the money to buy food and, at times, when playing truant or free from work, patronise popular movie cinemas such as the Palladium in Central Accra.

Champ's hustling had a delinquent side, a product of his youthful exuberance, which deviated from his Christian orientation. His father and church had instructed him that it was wrong for him to take what did not belong to him without first asking the owners. Strangely, however, he came to believe without knowing the source of that belief that some things like food could be exempted if the taker prayed and asked for forgiveness and protection from God. Obviously, his young self contrived that excuse. He manufactured a God-centred justification as an ideological 'anaesthesia' to numb any pains of remorse that such acts could inflict. The cruel pains of hunger intermittently compelled or naturally urged him to take fruit from someone's tree for satiation and life. Therefore, his philosophy of 'you can take without asking but pray to God for permission, forgiveness and protection' covered and was applicable only to food items. Consequently, he and his friends followed their adventurous youthful instincts and occasionally pilfered fruit and fish to eat or sell for money to buy their next meal.

Recalling his boyhood days to KSM, a Ghanaian TV celebrity and comedian, Champ jovially disclosed how in hustling he prayed for God's forgiveness and protection so that he and his friends, as mini-master hustlers, would not be caught and punished by the owners of coconut growing in his neighbourhood and on some sites along nearby beaches. Coconut was a major item of attraction to them (Azumah Nelson, TV interview with Kweku Sintim-Misa (KSM), c.2008/2009.) They sold 'their' coconut to the public; however, they found a ready market with some unsuspecting migrant Igbo traders from Nigeria who sold items such as second-hand clothes (popularly known in Ghana as *ofos* or *obroni wawu*) and palm oil in Accra markets such as Salaga Market and Komkompe. The traders used the endosperm (copra) as a preferred condiment to their favourite *gari* (a couscous-like food made from the



tuber of cassava). Champ disclosed that like he and his friends, '... other kids in our neighbourhood ... engage[d] in such ventures and other activities to make some few cedis (money) to buy food ... [and other] items in the city' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). The 'ghetto' life was hard, so they and other children simply developed 'new' ways to find money and/or food. Consequently, 'some of the children using clubs, [stone-throwing homemade] catapults, and [homespun] traps, hunted down rodents ... and birds' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009; Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). The hunt for rodents, particularly a ratlike one called *gbela* in Ga, and birds satisfied a basic culinary need. They grilled their game and ate. Some also enjoyed the brisk and unpredictable but often interesting segments of city life with their surplus money. 'They often would "hang" around popular centres like Opera Square, once the main bus terminal for the government-owned Omnibus Services Authority, and play, make plans for money, and watch movies' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009; Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). Opera Square, which is now a car park/market extension, acquired that name because it was located near the popular Opera cinema, which, like the Palladium, was a trendy cinema.¹³ Occasionally, Champ and his friends also took pleasure in the common pastime of enjoying the city and its cinemas (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009).

As a teenager, 'he ... unlike some of us [some of his friends], did not 'chase' girls' (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). Reluctant and naturally bashful when it came to the issue of courting the friendship of girls, he felt comfortable with his reserved disposition towards the opposite sex. Moreover, he thought that time and money to pursue amorous and romantic escapades were scarce. He was fundamentally orientated to the pending task of assisting himself and family with the little that he could make (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009).

He spent the time that he otherwise would have used in such adventures with his friends to look for work and play. He continued to play football and became 'a good keeper of the goal posts' (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., March 14, 2009). He had stints with the pastime and business of hiring out bicycles of other people, normally older men, in his neighbourhood for a commission. As he engaged in these survival activities, which he deemed ad hoc and transient, he strongly craved a permanent livelihood and social security.

From the age of about 10 to 18, while he remained practically under the care of his mother and maintained bonds with family, he sought security from his gang on the streets, streets that other turf-controlling groups made tough, dangerous and competitive. His group developed a reputation as young but skilled and respected street fighters in the environs of Timber Market, Swalaba, Adedemkpo and Bukom.

Interestingly, behind this life of virtual streetism and hustling, he had started to pursue amateur boxing around the age of 14. I shall return to a discussion of this activity.

By the time he was about 16 going on 17, he had totally abandoned the idea of going to school. He saw the ring and gloves as the way forward. He convinced himself that certificates were not the stuff that boxing legends, a class he wanted to belong to, were made of. Having abandoned school with a stuttering knowledge of spoken English and some rudimentary arithmetic, his knowledge of the former became useful to him during the early part of his professional days when he pidginised and fractured it to articulate his views in pre- and post-match interviews, press conferences and conversations with international and local non-Ga speakers. Interestingly, he consciously and gradually improved his knowledge of English as his days as a professional and international champion progressed. He took private general lessons to hone his academic abilities in literacy, numeracy and entrepreneurship.

As underscored, his boxing-friendly locality, which contained several active gyms, influenced him to domesticate his fighting skills within boxing. It was from there that he also gained primary understanding about the Ghanaian penchant to worship and lionise national heroes and famous boxers.

Although his reading ability was weak, his basic schooling and natural inquisitive mind enabled him to appreciate sports and boxing news in the media about inspiring accomplishments of past and existing boxers. From popular iconography and pictures of famous international, national and Ga-Mashie boxers in newspapers and on posters and billboards in local gyms and some entertainment venues in Accra, to public commentary about sports, and boxing information from the print and electronic media, he recognised the national and international popularity, admiration and respect accorded boxing icons. He craved these rewards. Inspired, he strengthened his resolve to live as an occupational boxer.

In that situation, at about the age of 15 or 16, he became an electrician apprentice with the Ghana Prisons Service in Central Accra. It was a provisional measure to acquire a secondary vocation and extra cash. His daily life became more ordered by a busy schedule: going to work, normally in the morning, running errands for superiors, doing minor electrical repairs and services, and returning home around two or three o'clock in the afternoon to assist his mother in her business. From about four or five o'clock, he would jog to the beach and emulate the regimen of exercises of the boxers he commonly observed. Creatively, he used the chore of hewing and chopping firewood with an axe as an additional form of exercise. This exercise proved to be economically rewarding. He received fees and food for preparing the wood for women who used it as fuel to cook assorted food which they sold in his neighbourhood. Despite all these efforts to better the life of his family and himself, their dire economic circumstances prevailed.



Central Accra urban society, in his estimation as a teenager, displayed a marked inequity between social classes. In an interview in October 2009, Azumah Nelson recalled that

[M]any families from different [ethnic] groups residing in Jamestown and Ussher Town ... wanted jobs in Accra ... were poor ... had no proper housing and their children had to live [virtually] on the street. Access to education, medical care, and ... [potable] water supply, sewerage, and electricity was difficult for such people. A [substantial] gap existed between the rich and poor in the capital but from my experiences the [urban] problems, poverty and lack of [access to] clean water, electricity, health care, and schooling was more [acute] in the environs of Jamestown and Ussher Town. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

Central Accra contained interjacent spaces concentrated with major banks, large department stores, and government ministries and administration sectors such as the Cocoa Marketing Board headquarters, yet from his childhood days to the pubescent ages of 16 and 17, Champ recognised increasing amounts of poverty around him and the social deprivation, squalor and discontent in shanties along the city's littoral area, where Jamestown and Ussher Town were sited. Such shanties, like those in Timber Market, were crowded and cramped. Except for a few colonial double- and triple-storeyed structures built with either stones and mortar or bricks and mortar, and those that belonged to the colonial African elite (*owula*) of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many 'homes' were decrepit compound houses and huts built of mud and any useful materials that their owners could find. These included sticks, palm fronds woven into screens, sheets of plywood and corrugated iron, concrete breezeblocks and leftover packing cases obtained from warehouses and from the Tema harbour. With stinking open sewage gutters also contouring and radiating within them, the shantytowns of Jamestown and Ussher Town existed like mazes with narrow muddy labyrinth-like lanes called *longo longo* where domestic livestock and dogs scouted for scraps. Occasionally, Champ strolled, hawked or moved with his friends to other parts of the ever-sprawling surroundings of the administrative and economic capital city, especially the north and west. There he saw areas that evidently accommodated high-income earners and wealthy families. They comprised structures such as two-storey houses and elegant colonial-style stilt-based houses, with wide verandas, and lush gardens and bougainvillea-covered walls. Many of the middle-range houses (mainly occupied by government workers) were bungalows with corrugated roofs and patchy lawns and hedged by trees. Champ retained images of international and private schools constructed of concrete, where the children of 'rich' people, civil servants and expatriates studied in comfort, and blocks of government-built flats for the city's expanding population of civil servants. These lasting mental images of social contrast also naturally encouraged him to seriously view boxing

as a possible gateway to transform his own socio-political circumstances and acute economic deficiency.

Champ's teenage memory contained painful scenes of his toddler days. Scenes of his mother sweating under a wide-brimmed straw hat as she sold fish in the heat of the sun, with him either strapped to her back or playing next to her wares, and flashbacks about labouring women who, with their crying babies, habitually sat at roadsides and in cramped unhygienic sections of markets like Makola selling assorted items, were common. He reflected on his childhood days in a community where most children slept very little and woke up around three o'clock in the morning to engage in a number of ventures to help their families to earn some extra money, such as selling newspapers, and then going to school, mostly arriving late and normally too exhausted to assimilate easily lessons in the classroom. Such reflections were emotionally disturbing, but his burgeoning relationship and occupation with boxing availed him of a psychological escape route.

Between the ages of 16 and 18, his boxing and exercises had a cathartic effect on him. They purified his thoughts and briefly diverted his stress and freed him from worries induced by his brooding on the prevailing poverty in his locality. Furthermore, preferring boxing as a tool of emancipation from the socioeconomic quagmire he continued to endure, he deemed tailoring a profession for which he was not 'cut out'. His father's profession had not brought adequate and sustainable economic liberation to his family. His resolve to divert from the tailoring tradition in his family to chart a profession in the 'art of bruising' – boxing – became non-negotiable. 'I thought that if I excelled in that career, I shall be able to take my parents and siblings to a better location in Accra where they could access better social amenities and live a decent life' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). Lingering in his sub-psyche was also the commonly entertained notion that boxing could improve social status and depict and heighten masculinity (equated with power), which the strong 'combat-ready' body, associated with the culturally venerated *Tabilo* (warrior), symbolised.

He continued to sharpen his skills as an amateur and became certain of a future as a professional. About two years before the age of 16 Champ basked in his confidence as a street 'brawler' who could beat almost anyone of his size and age '... because he was good at using his fist and could also wrestle. He beat most of his opponents in street engagements' (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., September 9, 2009). Nurturing his prime interest to box, which the boxing incident involving the 'boy bully' had reinforced, he occasionally observed training sessions at gyms in Jamestown and Ussher Town and longed to be in the ring.

However, an incident ... provide[d] the opportunity for me [Champ] to make rapid strides toward getting a real encounter in a boxing ring. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)



It happened one day. He met a young boxer, probably just about 10 years old, and his trainer around 'my house at Timber Market to pick up a pair of boxing boots from a cobbler' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). Champ saw the pride and joy exhibited by the young boxer when he took the boots. He also saw the friendship between the coach and the boy. Immediately, Champ desired the boy's position. Courageously and jealously he confronted the coach:

'Is this boy a boxer too?' ... [He] asked me why I asked. I responded that [he] could not be a boxer. I then declared: 'I can beat this boy in the ring' ... The coach then, annoyed [by my audacity] and possibly thinking that I was arrogant, decided to give me the opportunity to engage his trainee in a boxing encounter. I believe ... he ... wanted to ... teach me a lesson ... that boxing was [fundamentally, the harmonious] blend of [brute] physical strength, [deployment of] tact, strategy and mental discipline. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

The face of the young challenger brightened when the coach agreed to his challenge. Champ and his supporter friends followed the pair to a boxing training arena at Agbado. He was mesmerised by the nimble-footed shuffling and dexterous combination of quick ducks and precise punches from the young boxer. 'He beat me. I just could not believe it' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). It betrayed his untrained and natural pugilistic skills and tactics. He became keenly interested in the secrets of the art, for it was not just a matter of brute force but right coaching, tactics, skill, and the mental and emotional discipline necessary for fighting.

I ... went to my father, spoke ... about the incident and mentioned ... that I wanted to learn the [noble art of] self-defence. He consented ... His support remained intact and when I made great strides in my career, I considered him as my number one supporter until he died. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

During his amateur days, his father usually sewed his boxing trunks and embossed the front with homemade inscriptions such as 'Mighty Warrior' and 'Terrible Terror' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009).

After losing to the young boxer, Champ painfully vowed mentally and audibly to take revenge. He asked the trainer to take him on as a protégé, but his arrogance, which he had earlier ignorantly displayed, cost him. The trainer refused his request. Determined to make a comeback and receive protégéship, he frequented zones of boxing training to emulate 'boxing' moves and styles. He secretly rehearsed such copied assets. 'I did not have a girlfriend. [I did not] smoke and drink alcohol. I [used] my time and energy to train [and build] my skills' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). Apart from his visits to training enclaves and gyms, especially those in Bukom, and some unsuccessful requests for admission, he attended school

intermittently, and also sold sugar cane, mangoes and plantain to send money home. His frequent visits earned him a reputation as a 'mini gym-lizard' and notable 'peeping tom' at many of the gyms of boxing clubs in Accra, particularly in Bukom, Swalaba and Agbado.

Eventually, he succeeded in convincing the coach, whom he had earlier angered with his arrogance, that he had a sincere interest in boxing. He was probably about 14 or 15 when the trainer, who had a Liberian or Sierra Leonean background, agreed to tutor him. Obele Wale Thom, the tutor, had had a stint with the craft as a boxer in Accra and later became a self-styled trainer and a known affable social commentator on boxing within the Jamestown and Ussher Town localities. His penchant for giving free boxing tips to young boxing enthusiasts cultivated him as a burgeoning trainer within Agbado and a known itinerant instructor.

Champ was encouraged by his friends to understudy the trainer, notwithstanding his level of professional experience. Incidentally, during this period of search and affiliation with the trainer, Champ struck up acquaintance and maintained an informal mentor-protégé relationship with the popular Attuquaye Clottey, one of the country's early finest boxers and coaches, who eventually played a key role in his further development as a boxer.

Through a shared compulsive interest in boxing, Champ became friends with the other disciples of Obele Wale Thom, namely Speed Addy, Ogah, who had familial connections to either Liberia (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009) or Nigeria (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., September 9, 2009) and Tee Tei. Their trainer did not have a permanent gym, so this informal assembly of trainees trained and sparred at unrestricted spots at Agbado and on the beach at Ussher Town. Champ combined his electrician-apprentice work with these boxing lessons. Consequently, he took part and excelled in some local boxing tournaments, like those organised by boxing enthusiasts such as Nii Ajenkwa, Kojo Sardine, and Kofi Badu at the Blue Lagoon Hotel in Sakaman near Odorkor in Accra. These gave him public exposure and extra pocket money and enhanced his amateur skill and record.

Early glory: From the Prison Service Boxing Team to the Black Bombers, c.1974 to 1978

Champ sought to represent Greater Accra in boxing at National Sports Festivals, but available teams were not eager to engage him in national tournaments. 'All the participating teams, like the Greater Accra Police and Armed Forces, rejected me because I was small', he lamented (*GS*, March 3-9, 1992, 4). In 1974, he was dropped from the Greater Accra team because the authorities said he was too small in size to



fight in such a 'tough' tournament. Determined and frustrated, he approached one Mr Alhassan and other officers in charge of Prisons Service Sports and requested to be included in the service's team. The same 'you are too small and too young' met him. After persistent begging, and support from the team's captain, Joseph Adama Mensah, the pleading flyweight was asked to prove his competence in a contest. He beat Peter Mensah, a better-known favourite of the team. He later gave the soldier and national star Ben Carl Lokko, who had called him 'tiny', a TKO. Champ won a gold medal for the team at the festival (*GS*, March 3-9, 1992, 4).

After that breakthrough, he became recognised as a service sportsman for about four years. Within that period, in 1977, he became a bantamweight, and joined the featherweights the following year (*GS*, March 3-9, 1992, 4).

When he was about 18, his focus on entering professionalism had become sharper. A popular historic boxing event contributed to that. Champ was highly motivated when Ghana's D.K. Poison became a world champion. 'D.K.' returned from overseas to Ghana in the early 1970s and practised with other boxers in Ga-Mashie. From about 1973 and 1974, he trained at Agbado with the respected coach Attuquaye Clottey, who had relocated from Kumasi to Ga-Mashie and established Akotoku Academy. D.K.'s fine skills as a featherweight and record of victories were well known among the boxing fraternity in Accra. He was especially popular in the Agbado and Mudor areas. He snatched the national featherweight title in 1969 and became the twelfth contender to the Commonwealth title. In 1974, he annexed a title from the ABU. Whilst training in Ghana for the world title, he inspired young boxers in Ga-Mashie, including Champ.

D.K. used to spar occasionally with some up-and-coming boxers at Akotoku Academy. Champ intermittently sparred with him at boxing centres like the Community Centre boxing gym, picking up numerous advanced moves from the professional. This association also boosted his vigour and focus on boxing.

Through the patronage of forces such as the Supreme Military Council (SMC) of the government of Ghana, its Commissioner of Sports, Lt Col. M.P. Simpe-Asante, J.E.S. de-Graft Hayford, and the aegis of the SMC-sponsored Ghana Boxing Promotion Syndicate [Council] (the GBPS) chaired by Justice D.F. Annan, which was a consortium of boxing gurus (Quansah, March 6, 2007), D.K. had the chance to fight the WBC featherweight champion. He snatched the title in 1975 and instantly became a national hero. The government rewarded him with a Teshie-Nungua Estates house in Accra (*DG*, August 20, 2002).

For assisting D.K. to accomplish his feat, Attuquaye Clottey's status as a national boxing hero increased. Immediately, he became a much sought-after coach in Ga-Mashie and the entire Ghana. The academy of this man, who was a busy boxer in his generation and popularised the name of Ghana in his base in Australia ('Ken Bediako's

Sports Hall of Fame', September 30, 2008), became very popular and drew many students. The nation generally praised D.K., but he was hailed more in Ga-Mashie, where clearly and naturally his feat became a source of great inspiration for most up-and-coming boxers, including Champ. While Champ kept his old trainer, with the vision to learn more and make significant strides in his chosen career, he increasingly immersed himself in the popularly respected stable of Akotoku Academy. Other contemporary respected gyms were Indigo Boxing Gym, run by Awudu Kongoro in Lagos Town, now Accra New Town, Royal Castle Club in Kokomlemle and Attah Quarshie Boxing Gym in Jamestown.

Attuquaye Clottey's guidance soon turned Champ into one of the best students of that gym; hence he performed admirably at inter-gym competitions in and around Bukom and stood out as a student with a promising future. Small wonder that when he was about 20 years old, c.1978, he had managed to be selected for the country's national amateur boxing team. In his capacity as a member of this team, he blazed an impressive track in local and international engagements.

His motivator D.K. lost his title to Utah-born challenger Danny 'Little Red' Lopez on November 6, 1976 in a gruelling 15-round fight in front of about 122 000 spectators at Ghana's Accra Sports Stadium (Vieta 1990, 564). This humiliation devastated Ghanaian fans. However, it inspired Champ. He wished to win the title and glory back for the country. He thus eyed the professional level for this goal, which he successfully reached in 1984.

Whilst Champ trained at the Academy and sparred with other boxers at Bukom, he mainly resided at Cassava House. Intermittently, he spent time at Mamprobi. He maintained his job with the Prisons Service, but eventually the pay was insufficient. He benefitted from the service in another way, however. It provided a ready platform for him to have sparring sessions with some boxers of that agency's other national security services like the army and police, thereby sharpening his skill. Such engagements often happened at the beachfront gym of the Army Volunteer Force, near the Old Polo grounds where Kwame Nkrumah, on March 5, 1957, made his historic 'At long last ... Ghana is Free Forever ...' declaration of independence.

There Champ developed an arsenal of skills and a reputation as a pound-for-pound boxer, and attracted friends, admirers and acquaintances – junior and senior officers – from the security agencies. Thereafter, he persevered through the uneasy dynamics and contours of amateurship, and eventually succeeded in a legendary and distinguished career of professionalism.

His days as a budding amateur, when he was respected within Bukom and the *crème de la crème* of featherweights in Akotoku Academy, featured some interesting events that aided his progression to professionalism. His reputation as a good fighter, status as a boxing ambassador of the Prisons Service, and link to the famous Akotoku



Academy, from where many talents for the national boxing team were selected, catapulted him into the Black Bombers.

His amateur record was impressive. He clinched a Commonwealth featherweight title. This gradual yet steady progress fulfilled for him one of the dreams of most boxing youngsters in Ga-Mashie – travelling abroad for international exposure and social prestige. As an amateur fighter and member of the national team under coaches such as Attuquaye Clottey and Armstrong Agbana, he had the opportunity to embark on national assignments in places like Algeria, Canada and New York. He usually compared the seemingly technological advancement and economic affluence that he perceived in those places with his Ga-Mashie. The huge disparity between the two economic localities astonished him. His Jamestown-Ussher Town home was economically deficient. This realisation, however, 'urged me to focus and work hard to ultimately engage in the rings of professionalism in such countries to accumulate wealth to effect a positive change in my life' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). He explained:

[Conditioned] by my poor background, I was impressed ... by the high level of infrastructure and opportunities ... in such places. The gyms and facilities for their sport persons and boxers were advanced and strongly in place. Thinking about where I was coming from, I however became shocked at the huge difference. Saddened [by what I perceived], my mind ... followed my strong determination to improve [my circumstance in life] through professional boxing [and] ... my [ever-present] desire to help people, particularly the underprivileged, if I someday became [economically] liberated, increased.

Moreover,

I gradually [conceived and] shaped the thought that I would in future establish an institution or [put in place a mechanism, i.e.] open outfits to provide jobs ... and ... train underprivileged but talented youth to acquire formal education and also improve on their sporting talents. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He built the humanistic philosophy that he had to love people and use part of his material gains to the benefit of others.

God loved us ... He sacrificed His son ... for our sins. [I]f that son died for us then who are we, or who am I dying for? ... It was important for me to [metaphorically] die for, that is help, others. I thought that [if I became economically affluent] someday I would 'die' for others. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

This empathy for needy people stayed with him during his days with the Black Bombers. 'You could even see it on my face', he recalled, and how,

on one international assignment, during my amateur days ... [during] lunch in a big cafeteria, one competitor [jovially] commented on my [grim] face [because they never saw me smile]. He ... told the assembly that he would give ... money if he saw me smile. It was a joke. I smiled and everyone ... laughed ... (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He added that money to his living allowances and purchased some gifts for his family and friends back home.

I always ... got some gifts for my relatives ... [S]uch little acts ... were fulfilling. ... On one occasion, I did not get anything for myself but I got some things for other people. The coach, I think it was Agbana, asked me the reason. I told him I did not need anything. ... I was happy ... to get gifts to send home. Unfortunately, ... my baggage containing those items got missing in transit. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

It was in 1978 that he fought in Algiers, Algeria, as featherweight for Ghana at the All Africa Games (1978 Jeux Africains Alger) from July 13 to July 28. He defeated Kenya's Modest Napunyi for the gold medal. Elated by his victory,

We, [his neighbourhood, community, friends and relatives], stayed up all night and jubilated ... He had ... again revived that [Ga-Mashie spirit of] boxing accomplishment which had [seemingly] faded after D.K. Poison [was beaten]. (Frank Kwaku Dua Bannerman (Franko Nero), pers. comm., September 9, 2009)

Popularly known then as 'Terrible Terror', the victory made him a psychologically gratified hero with international character, but

... the amateur level did not pay well. My Algeria[n] achievement only gave me some money to buy some shoes and gloves ... and a few gifts ... however, ... I ... accomplished an international assignment, which could brighten my chances of getting a professional deal. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

Going overseas through boxing, and bringing home the laurels, he fulfilled the indigenous task and dream of most Ga-Mashie youth of standing fast and bringing fame to Ga-Mashie as commanded in the old paean for Attuquaye Clottey.

My accomplishment inspired me to strive for bigger trophies within the amateur division ... Going pro[fe]ssional was in sight, but ... it is not something that just comes [on a silver platter] ... [I]t was not an area that I could just jump into. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

One needs a promoter to join the professional class, but

I did not have it [promoter] ... so I decided to fight well and be disciplined ... I knew and trusted that those principles, with ... God, would get me to be noticed



by a promoter ... to make a mark in the professional arena. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He presented the trophy from Algeria to the National Sports Council and resumed work as a casual with the Prisons Service. He continued to train and through Attuquaye Clottey's influence was selected to join the Black Bombers¹⁴ for the Commonwealth games in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, lasting from August 3 to August 12. With determination, sheer energy and skill, he knocked out Samoa's Siaso Poto in round two, and defeated Canada's Guy Boutin and Zambia's John Sichula on points. He took the top trophy – gold – in the featherweight category. John Sichula took silver and Guy Boutin and the English boxer Maurice O'Brien acquired bronze. His was Ghana's only gold medal. The year 1978 was therefore greatly beneficial to his career.

Whilst working with the Prisons Service, he became familiar with and immersed in the sports affairs of the security services and acquainted with leading officers in the Ghanaian security agencies. These included the likes of Colonel John Sharpe¹⁵ and Major Amarkai Amarteifio of the army (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010). These two, for example, were energetic promoters of armed forces boxing and Ghanaian boxing in general. Amarteifio, who was also a lawyer, became the officer in charge of the Ghana Armed Forces Boxing Team and Sports.

Some of the key army personnel he knew gave him another opportunity in an international contest. Lagos, Nigeria, hosted the CISM (*Conseil International du Sport Militaire*) World Championship in November 1978. This festival, founded in 1948 by Henri Debrus, a French squadron leader, aimed to promote peace through sports between Armed Forces. Champ was selected by the local organisers as one of Ghana's boxing representatives at the games because he was a sportsperson and casual for the Prisons Service, a branch of Ghana's security services. Joseph Adama Mensah, Akwei Addo and Mama Muhammad were also selected. In the contingent of military persons, the four boxers went to Nigeria and ultimately won an impressive three gold medals. The boxing competition featured many fine fighters, including the well-known Tony Santana of the USA. The local organisers expected Champ to perform impressively and deflate Santana's flamboyance.

He had a series of tension-filled fights and appeased those military minds that sent him there by beating Santana on points in the featherweight division to diffuse the Santana myth and take the top trophy. His exploits in Nigeria and impressive record remained noted within the military, in Ga-Mashie, and among Ghana's boxing commentators and sports journalists, but the fame and recognition he acquired from December 1979 onwards as a professional surpassed his amateur stardom within the national context.

After Nigeria, he remained a national hero but not a much-celebrated one. The

masses were facing prevailing domestic socioeconomic and political pressures; hence many were not in tune with the acts of amateur sportspersons like him. The Supreme Military Council II (SMC II), which evolved from the SMC on July 5, 1978, was Ghana's government, with General F.W.K. Akuffo as the Head of State. This was a time of an acute shortage of consumables and essential medical supplies, and general economic hardship. Some corrupt officials and traders sold their hoarded goods at exorbitant prices. This widespread practice became known as *Kalabule*.¹⁶ The popular demand and general desire of discontented workers was civilian rule. This produced demonstrations and industrial strikes, particularly in the cities. Concerned with these crucial domestic problems and the way forward for the country, few people in the wider national context followed enthusiastically the amateur boxer's feats in Algiers, Edmonton and Nigeria. Nevertheless, his status as a popular folk hero in the environs of Bukom, Adedemkpo and Timber Market remained intact.

His amateur exploits and record with the security agency and the Black Bombers and the high quality of the skills that he exhibited in boxing in Ghana attracted the recognition of Flight Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, a young pilot in the Air Force who had been the officer in charge of the Air Force Boxing Team (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 4). Champ met this soldier who valued sports and thus occasionally participated in horse riding, shooting, swimming/diving, football, martial arts and boxing. Champ recalled: 'Because of my connections with the military, there were occasions that I had the chance to meet Rawlings at training sessions' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). Consequently, Rawlings's own interest in boxing prepared him to appreciate and like Champ's sporting side, a fondness that grew and endured. There was a shared sportsmanship between Champ and the soldier, and Rawlings assured him that he would be a force to be reckoned with if he went into the world of professional boxing (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). The soldier liked the national team and, according to Champ, he (Rawlings) demonstrated selfless acts of personal generosity in support of the team. 'Rawlings, using money from his pocket, at a period provided meals for the team, and there were times that he in our company, when we were camped, helped to clean our rooms' (Kissie 2010). The acquaintance struck c.1978/1979 between Rawlings and Champ produced positive results for the boxer in his professional career.

Through a military *coup d'état*, executed on June 4, 1979 and supported by accomplices such as Majors Boakye Djan, Mensah Poku, Mensah Gbedemah and some junior ranks, Rawlings became the Head of State of Ghana. He led the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), a junta which claimed that the putsch against the SMC II was a 'revolution' to exterminate corruption and social injustices in Ghana.

The AFRC's 'house-cleaning', which included the selling of goods at controlled prices and the trial of several senior military officers, leading to the imprisonment



and/or execution by firing squad of those found guilty of corruption, was generally welcomed by the masses, particularly the workers and students in the urban centres. The stratocracy wielded political power for about three months and then relinquished it to the civilian elected Hilla Limann-led People's National Party (PNP) government. Amidst several criticisms from its political opponents, and met by the masses who hoped for better days, the new government tried to engineer policies to steer the country towards positive socioeconomic transformation. The government's alterations in the national socio-political environment and economy contributed to awakening the minds of the masses to satisfying news and achievements in national sports and activities. Notably, Champ's accomplishments, gradually but strikingly, emerged to the notice and appreciation of the wider population.

He kept a handful of civilian friends at home and maintained his sports-oriented old acquaintances with pundits in the security services and some renowned administrators of Ghana boxing who admired him. Among this network was Justice D.K. Annan, who 'between 1977 and 1978, was the Chairman of the GBA' (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 4), and perceiving 'boxing as an expression of confidence and valour, which were typical Ga[-Mashie] traits' built 'boxing rings in the Ga-Mashie area and adopting the Attoh Quarshie Boxing Club ... provided material and equipment' (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 103).

While some of his acquaintances, including Rawlings, encouraged him to enter professional boxing, some in the army who deemed him a possible asset to army boxing, advised him to join the army. He considered the thought that if professionalism was delayed, he would secure a career in the army, yet a rushed detour into fulltime soldiering would completely end his chances and aspirations of pursuing full-time professional boxing. Thus,

my ultimate dream of becoming a world champion ... made me to discard the idea of abandoning my vision [of becoming an occupational boxer]. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

From the beginning of 1979, Champ lived in Mamprobi and Adedemkpo/Timber Market areas in turn. He often took afternoon jogs to train at Akotoku Academy or Army Volunteer Force gym.

On occasions when ... I did not want to go back to Mamprobi, I stayed at Timber Market. I was a boxing and sports hero, but ... financially, I was not ... I continued to undertake menial jobs such as pounding fufu¹⁷ and doing laundry ... to support myself and family. I decided ... to fight for 'money and glory', [rather] than for 'trophies and glory', especially since the amount of effort would be about the same. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

He had beaten almost everyone in his weight division and wanted to fight professionally

and challenge a champion. He was a strikingly athletic man of 21 years old, simultaneously sinewy and well carved in muscle formation. He possessed a height of about five feet and five inches (about 165.1 centimetres) and a reach of approximately 68 inches (about 173 centimetres). As he continued to fight amateur bouts, hoping to find a promoter, he and fine boxers like Peter Mensah, Kpakpo Allotey and Joseph Adama Mensah were selected to join the national team to fight in the amateur boxing World Cup Tournament in Madison Square Garden's Felt Forum in New York from October 11 to 19, 1979. Competing at the junior-welterweight level, he gave a third-round KO to the Australian Brian Tink. He did not reach the final because he lost to Serik K. Konakbaev (Konakbayev), a Kazakh boxer from the USSR. Peter Mensah, Kpakpo Allotey and Adama Mensah, competing in the 57 kg, 81 kg and 81 kg levels, respectively, also could not reach the final. The boxers returned to Ghana and were tipped as favourite probables for the forthcoming Summer Olympics, slated to occur in Moscow in 1980.

Back from the USA, compelled by economic pressures from an ailing Ghanaian economy and personal ambition, he 'bailed the boat' of amateurship before the end of 1979, becoming a professional before the Black Bombers could be constituted for the Olympics. A general appraisal of 1979 in terms of politics and economics in Ghana indicates a year in which national politics was turbulent and volatile. The national economy was fragile and ailing. Unemployment was high, especially in the urban centres. Numerous workers and casuals were made redundant and consequently a multitude of Ghanaians migrated to other West African countries, especially Nigeria, in search of jobs. Champ, his family and community suffered the hardships and privations of the year. Thus, he became aggressive, especially on his return from the World Cup tourney, in his quest to enrol in professional boxing and compete in local and, more especially, international fights with bigger purses. All he needed was for someone – a businessperson – to adopt and promote him in the world of professionalism. He had an enviable and/or desirable record of 52 fights – 50 wins and two losses. This was no mean accomplishment in Ghana, which possessed many good fighters. Inside the precincts of Ga-Mashie, and particularly Bukom, the roots of his passion for boxing, he had succeeded in gaining the uncommon local recognition as an ace amateur fighter. Moreover, within the boxing realms of Bukom, Adedemkpo, Timber Market and Agbado, where stiff competition existed among boxers who saw boxing as 'life', he survived the proverbial bloody and demanding battles that characterised training sessions in the gym, at the beach and within the *longo longo* street in those localities. With determination and hard work, he burst onto the professional scene and inscribed his name there as a great fighter.

His first fight was on December 1, 1979, a few days before President Jimmy Carter of the USA altered the arrangement of the Summer Olympics scheduled to take



place in Moscow from July 19 to August 3, 1980. In opposition to Russia's invasion of Afghanistan on December 24, 1979, Carter formally expressed in his January 23, 1980 State of the Union Address his country's decision to boycott the Olympics (Eaton 2016). About 64 countries, including Ghana, supported the boycott. However, some Ghanaian boxing pundits, including Amarkai Amarteifio, disagreed with Ghana's decision. Amarteifio even wrote an article entitled 'Take a Sound Decision' for the *Evening News* for Ghana to reconsider her decision (Amarkai Amarteifio, telephonic interview, February 1, 2011). Nevertheless, the PNP government did not send a contingent to the Olympics (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010). Incidentally, the probable fighters for the Black Bombers, Amarkai Amarteifio recalled, 'trained well and ... could have surely taken some ... laurels. [The] boycott ... I thought it was not in the interest of Ghanaian sports and boxing' (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010). Although the Black Bombers did not make their journey to Moscow, it did not affect Champ's development in boxing because he had already left the amateur level and started his difficult, yet famous, intriguing and exceptional journey in professional boxing. Meanwhile, as he accepted his destiny in boxing, the military-oriented life of Rawlings took him back to the forefront of national politics. Rawlings led a mutiny with a handful of 'hot-headed, youthful, idealistic' (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, 1) military and civilian collaborators and overthrew the PNP government on December 31, 1981. The coup makers accused the PNP of committing the sins of socioeconomic mismanagement and political ineptitude. Furthermore, they overthrew the PNP government for following unfavourable economic models and counsel from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The power-takers moreover averred that they wanted to salvage the national economy and deteriorating social infrastructure. It was out of such a perceived national matrix that the coup emerged and succeeded.

Rawlings suspended the constitution, disbanded Parliament and proscribed political parties. His junta confiscated assets of some officials in the deposed government and the 'people's tribunals' imprisoned some 'guilty' politicians and public officers. Limann, whose honesty was generally acknowledged, was not punished. Rawlings established the stratocratic populism-oriented PNDC and became its *de jure* Chairman. It ruled the country for about 11 years.

During the years of the collective executive leadership of the PNDC, Champ emerged as a sensational professional boxer and (international) world champion. The boxing-loving political leader and his officials showed interest in the boxer's development. Justice D.F. Annan in 1983 became Special Advisor to the PNDC Secretary for Youth and Sports, Major (ret.) Amarkai Amarteifio. In 1984, he became a full member of the PNDC and the *de facto* Vice Chairman of the junta. The sports secretary and Vice Chairman on behalf of the government encouraged the boxer to fight with the notion that his victories were Ghana's too.

Moreover, some government officials occasionally joined Champ's entourage to demonstrate the government's interest in his boxing business and thereby give him a psychological boost in his fights, especially those abroad. Amarkai Amarteifio accompanied him when he clinched the WBC featherweight title. D.F. Annan travelled with him elsewhere. He jogged and trained with him and gave him pep talks to boost his morale.¹⁸ Amarteifio disclosed that:

With the three of us – Rawlings, Annan and myself [Amarkai Amarteifio] – showing support to him, Azumah Nelson after he became champion, had a lot of confidence and primarily considered his fights as important national assignments. (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010)

Rawlings met the boxer and national sporting ambassador on numerous occasions to encourage and/or congratulate him on behalf of Ghana. On various occasions the sportsman also respectfully presented the trophies he snatched or defended to Rawlings, who was his Head of State, acquaintance and fan. Remarkably, the acquaintance between the two personalities has steadily endured and the two men continue to have profound respect for each other.

Concluding remarks

Considering his humble background, enmeshed in poverty in Ga-Mashie, his ability to surmount stiff boxing competitions in Ghana, and his ascendance with a successful amateur record to an excellent professional career, Champ, in a nutshell, impressively survived in a place and occupation where most persons were fully devoured in mid-career. Professional boxing further revealed the champion in him. Between 1980 and 1997, he became champion at National, Continental and Commonwealth stages, and World level. He acquired an amazing record of 46 fights, with 39 being victories, out of which 28 were KOs. The rest were two draws and five losses.¹⁹ This was truly legendary. How did he become that legend in the precarious world of professional boxing? The next chapter discusses his professional entry, major fights and victories, his maturity, failures and difficulties, his secrets of success in the ring, and his retirement.

Notes

- 1 Others are: 'Champ' 'Mighty Warrior', 'Terrible Terror', 'Zoom Zoom', 'Barimah' and 'Lion of Africa'.
- 2 Also known as 'Mahama Nassu House' or 'Warri House' (*GNA*, General News, November 16, 2007).
- 3 See Gilroy (1993). Although, influenced by the Gilroyian concept as a product of historical conjunction of cultures, which is also 'the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures



of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering' (3), Black Atlantic, used in the context of this study, means not only such black-originated products. It connotes the geo-cultural locations around the world, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, for example Brazil, where such forms were spawned through a process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity, through the slavery-inspired conjunction of African cultural motifs and ideas with non-African forms. See also Mann and Bay (2001).

- 4 In a personal interview at Foodies Restaurant, Osu RE Accra, on February 10, 2011, Champ was not sure about the exact place of his birth. After making a phone call, he disclosed that his mother decided to pay to give birth and get the best healthcare for him at that leading hospital in the country because he was her first child.
- 5 For information about why freed Afro-Brazilians repatriated to West Africa, how some found abode in Accra and integrated into Ga-Mashie, how they got the name Tabon, and how after taking on identities as Gold Coasters and eventually Ghanaians they contributed in various ways to the socioeconomic and political growth and wellbeing of Ghana, see Boadi-Siaw (n.d.); Turner (1975); Law (2001, 22-41); Christaller (1933, 489); Amos and Ayesu (2002, 41); Boyd (2010, 217-300).
- 6 See Furley Collection of translations, Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon, Dutch Diaries and Correspondence, N75, N76, and N77 passim.
- 7 Some economically affluent men – 'big men' – who, belonging to powerful Accra families, headed wide networks of clients and dependents in early colonial Accra. Carrying civic and political values and influence, the designation 'chief' could connote the Ga concepts of *niiatse* (notable property owner [wealthy person]), *sikatse* (literally 'father of money', i.e. rich man) and *oblempon* (honorary stool holder). Used for Kwaku Ankrah (also spelled Ankra or Ancra) in this work, it refers to that term which the community used about an enterprising member whose distinguished achievement at material amassment had provided him significant following and moral authority. This was commonly configured into political power, symbolised by the possession of a rich man's stool (*oblempon sei*), which at times put such a person on a par with or ahead of a real *mantse*. Holders and occupants of *oblempon* stools were often private successful middlemen in the Trans-Atlantic Trade who had dependants, slaves and other foreign elements at their behest. They could marshal their followers as armed aides and vigilante groups to defend and enhance their positions as independent entrepreneurs and political officials to enforce degrees of political power over people in their communities.
- 8 See Furley Collection. Dutch Diaries and Correspondence, N75, N76, and N77.
- 9 Ankrah, who died c.1840, occasionally raided to enslave people (Reindorf 1895, 254, 257). It seems he recruited some of the returnees and used their martial skills and strategies to assist his slave raids and trade (Amos and Ayesu 2002, 41). Consequently, it was reported in 1864 that some Tabon were in control of a flourishing trade in slaves, who were meant to be purchased as farm workers, from Krepi (*African Times* 1864).
- 10 Furley Collection N77, Journal, 13 August, 1836, and Lans to Ancra, dd. Elmina, 19 August, 1836. See also Brown (1927).
- 11 For the regal geneology of Tabon, see Amos and Ayesu (2002, 48-49); Schaumloeffel (2007, 41 cited in Boadi-Siaw n.d., 4-5).

- 12 See Amos and Ayesu (2002, 57) for a list of the original Tabon names.
- 13 The elite of society had their own cinemas, which included the Lebanese-owned four Rs cinemas – Rex, Royal, Roxy and Regal. The Cinema Palace, built by the Temani Brothers, pioneered the showing of daytime programmes from around 12.15 pm. The Opera Cinema subsequently came to compete with Cinema Palace.
- 14 Others were Kid Sulaimana (48 kg), Peter Mensah (51 kg), Anthony Abacheng (54 kg), Akwei Addo (60 kg), Baba Sumaila (63,5 kg), Moro Tahiru (67 kg), Muhammad Coffie (71 kg), Kpakpo Allotey (75 kg), and Joseph Adama Mensah (81 kg).
- 15 His support to the development of boxing continued throughout the 1980s (See ‘Ringcraft: Good Year for Ghana Boxing,’ *PDG*, December 30, 1987, 7).
- 16 This term from West Africa connotes the illegal buying and selling of controlled goods, and scams.
- 17 It is a thick paste usually made by pounding boiled starchy roots or tubers with a wooden pestle in a mortar. It could also be made with plantain. It is eaten with soup.
- 18 See ‘Justice [D.F.] Annan with Azumah Nelson and Amarkai Amarteifio in Ohio, USA after training session’ picture (Dadzie and Ahwoi 2010, n.p.).
- 19 In 2008, he fought a post-retirement bout and lost.



4

The rise of the Azumah legend: The early years

Do not scorn a weak cub, for he may become a brutal tiger.
Old Mongolian saying

A career in boxing, like life, demands and needs progress. The gifted young boxer's craving for bigger stardom grew. Hence, he registered as a professional in Accra in 1979. As an amateur champion, he had had a sneak preview and wee taste of celebrity and he liked both the vista and the taste. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, Azumah Nelson recalled: 'I wanted to be a professional, champion, and world legend like those before me.' Intuitively, he sought a promoter-manager – an investor who would provide him with professional financial security and guidance and direct him at the right speed into the competitive and lucrative world of professional boxing. However, this search did not produce results overnight, even though the boxer's reputation as a surviving champion from Ga-Mashie, where training sessions in the gym and on 'street corners' were stiff, competitive, bloody and demanding battles, was admired by Accra's boxing fraternity. Lack of finance for mentorship during that period of national economic depression possibly deterred many promoters from adopting the boxer.

Fortunately, Samir Captan, a young entrepreneur of Lebanese and Ghanaian parentage, boldly decided to invest in him. His forebears, the 'four Captan brothers', had settled in Accra during the colonial period, and became astute businessmen (Akyeampong 2014, 235). The close-knit Captan family acquired diverse businesses, including the popular Opera cinema, and became part of Ghana's commercial aristocracy (Akyeampong 2014, 235–238). During a personal interview on March 22, 2010, Samir mentioned that he had been exposed to the essentials of commerce and the leisure of watching 'upper-class' sports like horse racing, polo and golf and had become respected in the circles of young Lebanese businessmen.¹

Tall, good-looking and with a hypnotic stare, he knew when to and when not to gamble with a business idea. He loved boxing, a passion which developed in his

days as a brawl-loving school-going teenager. However, as a businessman he studied the amateur terrain, especially the one just outside the Opera cinema and square – the quarters of Ga-Mashie – and saw abundant talent, investment and profits, and hence established Sikaprix boxing promotions. The Sikaprix boxing promotions and management group plunged him deeply into the local circle of managers, promoters and key boxing administrators. It included Messrs Weglo, D.F. Annan, Amarkai Amarteifio, H.P. Nyamitei, Heyward-Mills and Allotei Cofie. As a technocrat, he remained in the heart of Ghana's amateur and professional boxing and became the Chairman of the GBA in 2009.

In November 1979, Sikaprix formally started to look for an opportunity to give Azumah Nelson his maiden local professional bout as soon as possible.

Azumah Nelson ventures into professional boxing

Circa 1978/1979, Sikaprix negotiated with Champ and agreed to manage his professional career. The occasional stipends that he received from the group gave Champ a feeling of financial security and a real hope of riches to come. Hoping for a professional championship fight, he intensified his training at Akotoku Academy and various gyms with other 'pugs'² such as Razor Akwei Addo and the renowned Clottey Brothers – Judas, Thunder and Hector, his anxiety for a bout surging. He came under Sikaprix with a slide-and-glide technique, characterised by profuse smooth movements of torso, and nimble footwork, which his sinewy legs supported and activated. His flashy fighting speed, accompanied by lightning jabs, overwhelmed sparring partners and impressed and assured Samir and his fellow boxing cognoscenti who observed their protégé. Meanwhile, Samir worked feverishly behind the scenes to get a breakthrough fight. On the trajectory of self-improvement and professional direction, Champ soon came under the guidance of Sugar Ray Acquaye (Akwei), alias Dolo Gazzey, another frontline trainer in big boxing. Acquaye eventually made Mamprobi the main training site for Champ. There the two and Duodu Wellington, a journeyman boxer and old boxing friend and sparring partner, helped to polish Champ's boxing style.

Before relocating to Mamprobi, which became the epicentre of his training with Acquaye, Champ had a national level non-title professional fight. This 126-pound³ eight-round contest with Billy Kwame took place on December 1, 1979 in Accra. He quickly won this 'trial' on points. Residing at his father's place, he normally trained at a spot near the Mamprobi Plaza Cinema, to the pleasure of some of his admirers from his old neighbourhoods. He remained in touch with his relatives at Timber Market through visits on his free days.

Sikaprix inched him towards the national featherweight title by securing another match on February 7, 1980 in Accra, in which he kayoed Nii Nuer in round three.



Next, he fought Henry Saddler, another tough 126-pounder in Accra. He unleashed powerful hooks, timely 'stinging' jabs and intermittent heavy punches against Saddler. His nimble feet and fast legs enabled him to avoid many attacks. Such movements fatigued Saddler. Ultimately, he issued a KO in round nine and won the national 126-pound title and a modest financial reward on March 3, 1980. The new national champion continued with these 'teaching' fights and kayoed Henry Okpoti in round eight to defend his title in Accra on April 17, 1980. On July 4, 1980, he won on high points in round ten against challenger David Capo. After these triumphs, his camp decided to proceed to the continental championship level and use it to launch his international professional career. Coveting a world title, he did his daily workouts and avoided a promiscuous lifestyle, bragging, smoking, drugs and alcohol with self-discipline and modesty. He kept an abiding faith in God. His trainer depended on these qualities and his great natural ability, physique, self-assurance and exceptional reflexes to mould an efficient super-fighter out of him.

The long-awaited international professional career started on December 13, 1980, when he fought Joe Skipper, a Nigerian national champion, over the vacant ABU featherweight title in a fifteen-round contest in Accra. Skipper was a banger and real pound-for-pound fighter and not a pushover. The Ghanaian's movements as he went toe-to-toe with the hard-nut-to-crack contender were surprisingly sluggish during the first five rounds. He showed signs of fatigue, so Skipper landed some solid bangs and jabs to his head and body. Champ's managers became anxious. This was a chance in a lifetime and the boxer knew it. 'Capture the ... continental title and, man, ... the world championship will then come to you, by the grace of God,' he thought. Shouts of exasperation like 'Azumah, meni ofeo? Yi le!' ('Azumah, what are you doing? Beat him!') came from his astonished supporters and corner-men whose faces showed embarrassment. Pain was absent on their faces!

He snapped out of his 'trance' in round six. Was the 'real good stuff' of Sugar Ray Acquaye's trainee going to show? Oh, yes! He unleashed a barrage of blows on the Nigerian fighter in round seven. He excited the crowd in round eight – the round of glory. Ultimately, Champ delivered a technical knockout (TKO) in the tenth round.

The new featherweight champion of Africa joyfully pontificated about his boxing superiority to the media and boxing enthusiasts during the customary inside-the-ring post-match interaction. Sikaprix had found a gem, but was a world title imminent? Well, Champ soon added another international, not world, title to his rich accumulation of prizes: the British Commonwealth of Nations featherweight title. On his quest for the ultimate crown – a world title – he did not become a homemade titlist who fought only in Ghana. In 1981, he defended his titles and won some teaching bouts both within and outside Ghana. Unlike some boxers who, for obvious reasons, preferred to fight before home fans, he fought in foreign territories. He

fearlessly took his title to other places to defend it. He rolled through that year with one W, one KO and two TKOs over increasingly tougher opposition. His first victim was Bossou Aziza, whom he defeated on February 24 in Lomé, Togo, in round ten. Next was Don George on May 2, in a KO in round five in Accra. He mauled Miguel Ruiz on August 18, through a TKO in round three in Bakersfield, California. After Ruiz, on September 26, 1981, he deprived the immensely talented and experienced Aussie, Brian ‘Close’ Roberts, of the vacant Commonwealth featherweight title. He acquired the title in Accra through an impressive round five TKO. Mickey Fernandez, an Australian boxing great, who was in Roberts’s corner, admiringly predicted the future of Champ, then the 25th contender to the WBC world title, thus: ‘Brian boxed liked a true champion but Azumah Nelson will be a great world champion one day’ (Wheatley, *Fightnews.com*, Boxing News, September 15, 2010) The prediction came true.

This gem of Sikaprix did not disappoint his managers. He maintained his reputation as a people’s person. His kinship spirit kept him close to his relatives in Adedemkpo. In a personal interview on February 10, 2011, he related how he had made time to be with his mother, went to his old neighbourhoods to show comradeship, walked around the old gyms and took advice from the old boxing brains there, and, intermittently, shadowboxed and conversed on street corners with old social contacts and friends, and ate and shared jokes with them. Some of his friends were into petty trading and lumberjack work as suppliers and retailers. He spared money, when he had some, to provide modest financial assistance to friends and siblings. Meanwhile, he cultivated the habit of watching out for the cool gazes and friendly smiles of a young maiden around Timber Market. She was Beatrice Nana Tandoh, a product of Accra High School. Her parents were retailers of general merchandise. Champ disclosed that ‘Beatrice’s father was from the Eastern Region and I think her mother was from the Western Region.’ As a local supporter of Champ as a budding folk hero and champion amateur boxer, Beatrice admired his heroism. She maintained a long-standing platonic friendship with the hustler-boxer. He bashfully had numerous conversations with her, including serious ‘let us try to get to know each other’ ones. She became an important companion and social contact of his. Despite her relatively well-to-do family background, she liked the hustler-boxer. In the spirit of friendship and budding affection, she showed him little acts of kindness and gave him small gifts of food during his amateur days. This friendship between the homely maiden and street-tough Champ endured through 1979. Upon becoming an international hero, he thought of

... having a wife ... to support me, make a home ... care for our children, and ... have a peace of mind ... I wanted to focus ... not to be distracted with ... [promiscuous] ‘fun’. ... [B]y the time I got the Commonwealth title I knew



that the time was coming for me to settle down with one. Beatrice was the one that I considered.

Beatrice overlooked their ethnic and family differences and developed a liking for him – her Champ and hero. He recalled that ‘Nana [Beatrice] was kind and beautiful. She was an important reason why I used to go ... to the old areas [Timber Market and Adedemkpo areas].’

After triumphing over Brian Roberts, the boxer became restless for progression. Sikaprix cautiously slowed down its pace to get him to mature and consolidate his position as a Commonwealth titlist. Contrary to this model, the young boxer was preoccupied with the desire to quickly beat the continent’s best to fully advance onto the world championship scene. He fought a tough hard-to-hurt boxing opponent called Kabiru Akindele in Freetown, Sierra Leone, on December 4, 1981, and kayoed him in round six to retain the African title. The year 1982 ushered in the end of the partnership and relationship between the boxer and Sikaprix. His heightened search for a quick opportunity to access the world scene and inch nearer to the world title and the inability of the two parties to agree on certain financial issues compelled them to agree painfully to break their business ties. He awaited any person or group that made a firm promise to expedite his journey to world championship level.

Ringcraft Promotions Incorporated, another boxing management group in Ghana, with strong connections to some of the international promotion moguls, invited him and he obliged. Difficult as it was, business professionalism prepared Sikaprix to let go its protégé. As a mother must do with a growing child, Sikaprix had to allow him to explore the rough and unpredictable world of professional boxing to make mistakes and learn from them. It was a moment to flap his wings and fly, a goodbye period. When I met Champ and Samir Captan for a drink at Champ’s restaurant at Osu, RE in Accra in March 2010, they cordially discussed boxing and other personal matters. Champ stated: ‘Samir has continued to be my friend and adviser on many personal and business issues. We still get on well with one another’. He added: ‘Currently, Samir is the Chairman of the GBA, and I am one of his assistants. I occupy the office of Technical Director of the GBA. So, we are still close’.

Promising to use their connections and capital to arrange international fighting engagements quickly and draw him closer to the world title, the investors in Ringcraft managed to attract him, and a series of quick deals formalised their alliance. This Ringcraft group had and could create deals with some influential international fight promotion kingpins such as Mickey Duff⁴ and the renowned African-American promoter Don King. Daring and fresh, and financially strong and energetic on the boxing scene, Ringcraft was administered by three Ghanaians: Dr Oko Kwatekwei, Seth Asah and John Kofi Kermah. Oko Kwatekwei, who hailed from Bukom (Amarkai Amarteifio, pers. comm., December 15, 2010), was executive secretary

(PDG, December 30, 1987, 7). The gentlemen invested in Ringcraft because of Ghana's fertile boxing terrain and financial potential, which could be tapped with proper management and strategy and the right calibre of boxers. Moreover, the counsel and motivation from some local experts, like Mr 'the Hawk' Weglo, an Accra-based businessperson and boxing aficionado, who were familiar with domestic rising stars, especially the ambitious and ascending Azumah Nelson, inspired the trio to invest in Champ. The boxer's tale of the tape and serious training sessions impressed them. They and the boxer agreed to collaborate within the codes of good management, mutual respect and satisfaction, and to garner their energies for victories, respect, financial rewards and glory to Ghana. During our interview on March 23, 2010, Azumah Nelson told me that, on his part, he

was ... determined not to let them [Ringcraft] down, [and] myself down. They promised ... me fights ... and [to increase my reputation internationally]. I was ready for such encounters which possessed ... danger and was ... tough.

After bidding 'farewell' to Sikaprix he said 'hello' to Ringcraft. From 1982, he 'set out', as he put it, 'to conquer the world'. It was imperative for him to engage in build-up bouts and beat favourable contenders to the WBC world title. The closest contender in Africa to the WBC featherweight title was Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda's national hero, Charm 'Shuffle' Chiteule, who was the ninth contender. Champ was ranked 13th (*Ghanaian Times (GT)*, April 19, 1982, 7), so Ringcraft thought that a fight between the two boxers was a must.

Ringcraft asked Charm to challenge the Ghanaian boxer in one fight, in his 'backyard' in Zambia, for Champ's two titles – Africa and Commonwealth. Tempting! Charm's cupidity made him take Ringcraft's bait, crafted to unseat him as a higher contender. He was 'charmed' and he agreed to fight. The champion and his new coach Floyd Klutei Robertson, who also acted as a boxing coach of Ghana's National Sports Council (NSC), trained hard. Robertson remained Azuma Nelson's chief trainer until his death on November 23, 1982 (Vieta 1990, 579). Raymond Harry Reynolds reported in the *GT* (March 6, 1982, 8) that a huge Zambian crowd presented itself at the fifteen-round contest at the Independence Stadium, Lusaka, Zambia, on February 28, 1982. The Ghanaian boxer appeared calm amid Chiteule's strong home support. John Kermah, Seth Asah and Floyd Robertson were in attendance. Anxious for a quick win, the Zambian pursued Champ, who kept 'dancing around'. Meanwhile, Champ's hard snapping-popping jabbing power did a lot of damage. In round ten, the challenger was visibly exhausted from the 'chasing'. His eyes were closing and he issued ineffective 'feel-them-out' jabs and 'locate-where-he-is-without-looking' punches. Hooray! Champ was victorious by TKO in the tenth round. Zambia was disappointed on that fateful Sunday. The Ghanaian side was happy. Ghana's boxing



gurus, betters and gamblers in the shadows, and veteran trainers in Ga-Mashie could hardly wait for what this new kid would produce in the future.

The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) had keenly observed his fighting excellence and decided to avail state and national support to enhance his personal and symbolic image as a national athlete and hero. According to Ghana's former Secretary of Youth and Sports, Amarkai Amarteifio, in a personal interview on December 15, 2010,

We (the government) ... gave him [Azumah Nelson] anything; anything that he needed – logistic and honourable support – he had. We, especially when I was the Secretary in charge of sports, did that for the boxer to see his fights as very important to the image of Ghana so that he would fight to bring victories to Ghana and make the people happy.

After his success in Zambia, he was welcomed in Ghana at the Kotoka International Airport, Accra, by a Secretary to the PNDC, Mr B.B.D. Asamoah, on behalf of the government. At the Gondar (Military) Barracks where the champion and his managerial staff, including Mr Dan Agyeman of Ringcraft, were provided refreshments, the Secretary congratulated the champion as a 'national hero' and expressed the pride of the government and country in his feat (Reynolds, 1982, 8). The boxer was chauffeured around Accra in a government authorised police-escorted convoy to display his title. A large, happy crowd assembled by the roadside and hailed and cheered their local hero as he went to 'his' Jamestown, Ussher Town and Mamprobi. Feeling special amidst the jubilation and drumming and dancing in Ga-Mashie, he quipped '*Azumah e ba*' meaning 'Azumah has arrived' to the crowd. His local folks had a reason to celebrate. The boxer had once more made them proud. Ringcraft immediately investigated local and international fight opportunities to advance him and maybe 'square it out' with the WBC champion – the Mexican-American Salvador 'Chava' Sanchez. However, because he was virtually an 'unknown' African underdog to the big shots of boxing in the USA and the camp of Sanchez, the work to get a fight from Sanchez remained herculean. As Ringcraft touted the power and efficiency of their boxer who they claimed was the world featherweight champion in waiting, Sanchez, who kayoed D.K. Poison's nemesis Danny Lopez in round thirteen on February 2, 1980 to become the featherweight champion, must have thought 'who is this kid from Ghana that they want me to meet?' Sanchez soon found out and experienced a fight with him.

Ringcraft arranged for other build-up bouts for Champ. They obtained a well-paid and popular 'face-off' from Safiu Okebadan, the junior lightweight champion for Nigeria and West Africa. They signed the contract with Mr Bonny Ade, the manager-trainer of Okebadan, in Nigeria in May 1982 and fixed the bout on June 26,

1982 at the Kaneshie Sports Complex in Accra (*DG*, May 27, 1982, 7). The Nigerian had recently splendidly defeated the crack Nigerian Commonwealth lightweight contender, Kezeen Armah. The general expectation in Ghana and Nigeria was that he would give Azumah Nelson, who was making his first appearance in the local ring in the year, the required opposition (*DG*, May 27, 1982, 7).

On June 26, Champ acquired another victory through a round six TKO in front of Ghanaian and Nigerian fans. It was Mukaila Bukare and not Okebadan who was beaten. A barrage of punches from him in round four forced Bukare's gum shield to 'fly' and gave him a cut across his nose. In round five, Bukare countered marvellously to win the admiration of the fans. It was in round six that a vicious right-to-the-mouth punch sent Bukare to his knees and simultaneously attracted a throw-in of the towel from his corner (*GT*, June 28, 1982, 7). Where was Okebadan? As reported by Sammy Aduagyei (*GT*, June 26, 1982, 7), he was indisposed, hurt in training for the ten-round catchweight⁵ fight against the featherweight champion. Bukare had accepted to fight the champion at short notice to boost his ego and boxing record.

Shortly thereafter, fortune smiled on Ringcraft's campaign to get Champ to his ambition – a world title fight. Sanchez, the 23-year-old Mexican national hero who had won 42 of his 44 fights with only one loss (L) and 30 KOs, was compelled by circumstance and instructions from Don King and the WBC to fight the 'not-so-well-known' but decisive Ghanaian fighter. King promoted this world-class competition to satisfy his curiosity about what the virtually unknown 'kid from Accra' could do in the ring and 'bring home'. July 21, 1982 became the day for the bout in the USA. The invitation was served to Champ at short notice, and so he could not adequately prepare, yet Ringcraft accepted. Why? They could not allow that opportunity to slip by for they did not know when they would get another. It was a good opening for him to endear himself to the WBC world of professional boxing. Had the boxer not waited too long in the trenches? Yes! The bout occurred at 'the Garden' – the famous Madison Square Garden – in New York, where legends like Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Jersey Joe Walcott and Muhammad Ali had fought. This hallowed boxing ground had a long history of boxing excellence and an aggressive population of enthusiasts and press.

Inadequate preparation and the intimidating aura in 'the Garden' did not paralyse the steely Commonwealth champion from Accra. A tough challenge it was, but he took it to launch his career into the brighter limelight of world professional boxing. Ringcraft had been good and paid him well, stood by him, and arranged matches which had brought him face-to-face with a world title fight. When the fight became a possibility, he deemed it a serious affair which he could not abandon. His managers quickly flew him to the USA to engage in a less than two weeks urgent preparation against Sanchez. Sanchez had recently defended his title on December 12, 1981 in



a split verdict over England's Pat 'The Warley Wonder' Cowdell and a win from a unanimous verdict over Jorge 'Rocky' Garcia on May 8, 1982. Pundits wanted the WBC number one contender Mario Miranda, from Columbia, to challenge Sanchez. However, Miranda was incapacitated by an ear injury sustained while stopping Mexico's Marcos Villasana in Colombia. According to Awudu Ali (*Sp*, August 21, 1982, 7), he also had a hand injury. Under this circumstance Ringcraft lobbied Don King, who was desperately searching for a substitute, to find a way to make Champ the emergency replacement for Miranda. Don King however was not convinced immediately so he continued to explore other alternatives.

When news from the grapevine circulated about Don King's desperate search for a replacement, and Ringcraft's efforts at a possible takeover of that replacement position, Champ's training centre fast became a beehive of activities. Inquisitive fans, especially from Bukom, trooped there to see his hurried training. Some fans sang inspiring Ga songs of cheer to boost his morale. Girls, admirers, boxing promoters and Accra's sports journalists thronged to his training. The *New York Times* (*NYT*) (Sports) reported on July 1, 1982 that, before accepting him at the last minute, Don King had contacted Ruben Castillo, Juan La Porte and Rocky Lockridge but they had turned down King's offer because of the short notice to prepare. Since fighters rated by the WBC in the top ten were eligible to challenge, King's search widened its scope. Pat Cowdell and Jorge Garcia were not the favourite challengers. The available contenders were Azumah Nelson, Tony Santana of New York, who considered himself a junior lightweight, José Caba, who was recuperating from a broken nose, and Marcos Villasana (*NYT* (Sports), July 1, 1982).

Ringcraft's chairman, John Kermah, whisked Champ away to the Big Apple to urgently acclimatise and prepare in the US for the fight. His coach, Robertson, was interested in a victory for fame and a 'fat pocket', and to show the world that even if he had failed to grab the title in the 1960s, he could produce a 'fighting machine' to snatch the title. Yet, he could not travel along as part of Champ's entourage because of problems with his travel documents and getting them correctly processed. Ringcraft planned for him to join the boxer later to assist in a comprehensive training programme (*DG*, July 7, 1982, 7). Fascinatingly, King, the flamboyant entrepreneur, sceptical about the boxer, asked him to prove himself in a short exhibition. He obliged and demonstrated that he was a 'strong fighter'.⁶ Famous promoter Mickey Duff, who also represented Champ overseas (Kissie 2010)⁷, participated in bringing the Azumah Nelson – Salvador Sanchez fight to fruition. As part of the arrangement, Don King offered Duff promotional rights for some championships under his control, including those of Sanchez and world heavyweight champion, Larry Holmes (*DG*, July 15, 1982, 6). Moreover, Ringcraft, Azumah Nelson and Don King also agreed that Don King should exercise his management and promotional rights over the

boxer's work and fights. John Kermah and Ringcraft represented Azumah Nelson and Don King represented Don King Incorporated.

The *DG* (July 21, 1982, 7) reported that the 24-year-old challenger, who was making history, missed his local trainer, who could not obtain a USA visa in Accra. Robertson tried to go via London but was stranded there because he did not satisfy the immigration requirements. The absence was a serious psychological setback for the boxer. He was perturbed but managed to exude outward confidence in his training. He cabled the rest of his management team in Ghana to request them to ask his Ghanaian supporters to pray for his success. It is noteworthy that as Champ experienced the pain of disappointment and psychological stress because of the absence of Robertson, Robertson also went through a period of emotional crisis because of his frustration at not being at Champ's side during this all-important event. Nonetheless, Champ and his management team mustered their confidence and granted interviews to sports journalists and newspapers that were eager to learn about him and find out about his potency. L.C. Morgan, an American trainer with a record of more than 200 fights in a career spanning many years, was contracted and brought in from Los Angeles to train him.

The boxer's workouts were confined to the Times Square Gym in the vicinity where Sanchez also trained. According to Eugene Forson (*DG*, July 20, 1982, 7), their separate training attracted fans. Champ attracted a sizeable number of Ghanaian fans. Sanchez was not familiar with the underdog, so naturally he entertained some fears. He did not want an upset from the challenger. Hence, it was reported that Sanchez, sent 'spies' to study his training moves (*DG*, July 20, 1982, 7). Both boxers stayed at the Milford Plaza Hotel, but they met for the first time on Wednesday, July 14, at a pre-match news conference (*DG*, July 20, 1982, 7.), where they were formally introduced to anxious 'Solons',⁸ fans, promoters and journalists. Morgan and people who saw him train were wowed by Champ's demonstrable discipline, poise, precision and finesse. After a training session, Morgan told the Ghana News Agency (GNA) that he was an intelligent boxer and a good puncher who followed instructions well (*DG*, July 15, 1982, 6). Of course, these had been long-standing trademarks of his. The challenger and his managers had other doses of meet-the-media sessions with the ever-curious journalists of New York. In Ga and humorously fractured English, clarified occasionally by his managers, he consistently expressed his intention to unseat Sanchez to the journalists and sports commentators, many of whom were sceptical about such claims. At such meetings and in newspaper articles, many quickly registered the opinion that he was 'no match' for Sanchez. Ed Schuyler, Jr, reported in the *Argus Press* (July 22, 1982, 19) that some, who thought that an unlikely win by him would be a major upset, snickered at his nickname 'Terrible Terror' as a gimmick, and because of his height, labelled him 'Half Nelson'. Other



pro-Sanchez mudslinging writers wrote spirit-breaking things about him. Allegedly, a columnist of the *New York Post*, teasing the challenger, who was shorter than Sanchez (*DG*, July 21, 1982, 7), stated that 'he [Azumah Nelson] looks like he should be the water boy in the corner' (*DG*, July 15, 1982, 6). This derision came a day after the boxer was introduced to New York City's sports writers at a forum at Madison Square Garden. Another commented that:

Even if his (the challenger's) unbeaten pro[fessional] record is authentic, he looks so small. He figured to be an [sic] hoire d'oeuvre [sic] (hors d'œuvre or appetizer) for the monstrous fistic appetite of Sanchez who has an impressive record. (*DG*, July 15, 1982, 6)

Such media-spawned candle-snuffing comments annoyed him, his camp, and many of his inquisitive and never-say-die supporters in Ghana. He was not a palooka;⁹ hence, he insisted on a 'win' and 'upset' (*DG*, July 21, 1982, 7). His self-assured handlers, particularly Morgan, told the GNA: 'We are not underrating Sanchez. [A] great ... proud champion. But there is no way Sanchez can beat Nelson'. He confidently added, 'This is the time for Ghana to redeem the title (which Poison lost to Lopez)' (*DG*, July 15, 1982, 6). Confidence seemed to surge in Champ's camp and in the closing stages of his gruelling training on the day before the bout, he told the GNA that he respected but was not afraid of Sanchez. According to Eugene Forson of the *DG* (July 20, 1982, 7), he predicted that the fight would 'not go beyond 10 rounds' and would end in a KO. Exuding confidence, he left halfway through a video on Sanchez that he and his handlers were watching in John Kermah's hotel room. Asked why he abandoned that educational material, he replied that Sanchez would be stopped by round ten. 'Tell the fans that', he declared to an agent of the GNA.

In a personal interview on March 23, 2010, he recollected that on the day of the fight he had a warm-up and 'ask[ed] God to guide me and let His will be'. In the evening, he savoured the usual pep talk from his handlers and some inspirational Ga songs in his quarters. He, his coach and the 'dons' of Ringcraft proceeded to 'the Garden'. King and Duff were present to watch this boxer who was undefeated in thirteen professional fights, with ten KOs. A YouTube video titled *Azumah Nelson vs Salvador Sanchez 1-2* (n.d.) shows the challenger in a robe and pants made in the Ghanaian national colours – red, yellow, green and black. Oko Kwatekwei carried the Ghana national flag and led the boxer's entourage, which included a group of Ghanaian fans who beat out *kolomashi* and *kpalongo*¹⁰ rhythms from drums and waved white handkerchiefs as a symbol of victory. This fight was part of the official inauguration of Don King's Sports and Entertainment Network Cable Television at 'the Garden',¹¹ so it attracted a huge attendance, including some of New York's famous and influential persons. A sizable number of the Ghanaian community in the

Big Apple were present. The *DG* (July 23, 1982, 7) reported that, for good measure, there were also some Ghanaian diplomats at the ringside, including the chairperson of the GBA, Lt Felix Nii Okai, Ghana's Representative to the United Nations (UN), Ambassador James Gbeho and Ghana's Consul-General, Kwabena Kumi. The huge Hispanic crowd present was amazed by the ecstatic drummers and their rhythmic drum patterns. Many looked amused by the scores of Ghanaian fans who chanted inspirational songs and danced in their seats.

The crowd was bigger than any that he had experienced since he started boxing as a white collar¹² amateur. It overwhelmed him. In situations like that, the intricate moves of an overrated champion, booming boos and cheers, bright lights and camera flashes could disturb the physical, emotional and psychic frames of any newcomer. Potentially, they could push and turn boxers into fighting machines to fight to win or 'hypnotise' and 'congeal' boxers into defeat. Amidst the peering crowd and camera lenses, he felt the world's gaze and saw Ghana staring at him. Azumah Nelson recalled later, in an interview on March 23, 2010, that 'The scene was amazing, electrifying and scary at the same time'. However, his ordered composure and gallant fighting elicited strong cheers from the fans, especially the Ghanaians (*DG*, August 14, 1982, 7). Sanchez used his superior ring experience to remain vertical. The two slugged it out in the rounds. The jubilant crowd yelled for more show of brute strength and skill. By round fourteen the challenger was bleeding from the mouth and his right eye was badly swollen. He received two stitches on his cut lip, which painfully held in place an uncomfortable makeshift gum guard. He entered the bout from round one wearing a makeshift gum shield, which was trimmed with a blade to fit in his mouth because his custom-made one was missing (Kissie 2010)¹³. His mouth felt uncomfortable and very painful, especially from around round six when his extra protruding lip succumbed easily to a deep cut from a hit from Sanchez. The champion proved that he possessed the richer experience of world-class professional boxing. A hard, left hook knocked the challenger down, but he rose at five, took a mandatory eight-count and came back. Referee Tony Perez saved him from further punishment by stopping the fight during the last two minutes of that final round. It was a TKO! Judge Al Reid had the challenger in the lead with 133-132 while Tony Castellano and Artie Aidala had him behind Sanchez 135-131 and 134-131, respectively (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7).

Despite the psychological and physical feelings of insecurity, pressure and discomfort which he endured because of inadequate preparation, the absence of Robertson, intimidation from journalists and lack of a basic item like a proper gum shield, he gave the world a good performance and a valuable match. Many boxing fans became convinced that he was worthy of another title engagement and congratulated him. The president of the WBC, José Suleiman, showed his appreciation



by autographing and presenting the boxer's gloves to him as a souvenir (*DG*, July 27, 1982, 7). He admiringly told the GNA that the challenger was 'a courageous fighter. He took lots of punches but always came back. He is a credit to the WBC' (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7). Despite that fact that some of his supporters and sympathisers were naturally disappointed by the fact that he did not capture the title, praise and encouraging statements about the Commonwealth featherweight titlist came from other circles. The authoritative voice of the famous sports columnist Jerry Izenberg¹⁴ observed that although he had lost, he 'was within distance to the title'. He added that Azumah Nelson had done his homework well, for

he had learned to tuck his elbow in and curl the ebony rock God gave him for a body into a tight little shell. And against one of the most feared punchers in this business, Azumah stole round after round.¹⁵

Mickey Duff opined that Azumah Nelson had given a 'fantastic account of himself' but 'inexperience cost him the fight'. Nevertheless, he added that 'several other fights and Azumah would be champion' (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7). Ed Schuyler, Jr, reported in *The Argus Press* of July 22, 1982 that Sanchez paid homage to him through an interpreter as 'a great fighter with a lot of heart' who deserved a rematch. Many of Big Apple's we-have-seen-it-all and hard-to-please boxing fans who were endeared to him shook his hand and asked for his autograph (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7) when he and his handlers waited in the cold night outside 'the Garden' for a ride to his hotel. Don King intimated at a post-bout news conference that he would work with 'the talented young man who with more experience would shake the world and boxing history' (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7). He became a mentee of Don King and his stepson Carl King. Bound to the Kings by a contract, renegotiable after a decade, the boxer remained under the local guardianship of Ringcraft.

He did not get an immediate rematch because the WBC matched New York's Juan La Porte against Sanchez in a future fight. According to Ghana's *DG* (July 27, 1982, 7), New York's *Daily News* (*DN*) had revealed that La Porte, who had arranged a deal to fight Sanchez for the title on September 15, 1982, 'watched the proceedings of the fight with growing apprehension, fearful that the opportunity might be lost as Azumah went to work on the Mexican [Sanchez]'. La Porte was impressed by his valiant performance and later clashed with him in the ring.

Although he lost to Sanchez, the contest popularised him and his burgeoning professional career. It gave him uncommon exposure to the upper echelons of the WBC and recognition in the international world of boxing. Meanwhile, Ringcraft promised to make him fight other contenders in anticipation of another shot at the title (*DG*, July 27, 1982, 7). Commenting on the loss, John Kermah claimed: 'If he [Azumah Nelson] had not taken the chance he would still be in Africa [and not

recognised on the world level of professional boxing].’ He added that ‘at least we made our mark’ (*DG*, July 23, 1982, 7). Oko Kwatekwei predicted: ‘Having acquitted himself creditably and with boxing writers and fans talking about him, Azumah has hit it big time. Don King would be coming after us’ (*DG*, July 27, 1982, 7). Kwatekwei’s words proved true as Don King would work with the boxer and Ringcraft for a long time to come. The boxer left New York as a boxing force, toast of the Big Apple’s boxing writers and fans who hailed him as ‘hottest’ in the featherweight class. Revering the powerful aura of the match, the high pedigree of boxing which Champ exhibited, and the sheer strength which Sanchez demonstrated, Jerry Izenberg deemed the contest a battle of epic proportions and historical seriousness, comparable with notable classical bouts of boxing greats in American sports history. According to the *DG* (July 27, 1982, 7), Izenberg stated in an article titled ‘Featherweights wage war in Garden’ that ‘The Marriage’ of the 15th round, ‘coupled with the battle which preceded it conjured up memories of shadowy buildings with names like St Nick’s (St. Nicholas Arena) and Eastern Parkway [Arena] and Laurel Garden’. In sum, ‘the fight’, he remarked, ‘was not a 1982 prize fight. If you do not know what that means then you had better stick with whatever television gives you’. The places he referred to, which he argued had been invoked by the power and importance that came with the fight, were scenes of great classical boxing matches in the old days. The *DG* (July 27, 1982, 7) reported that ‘the *Mundo Diard* [sic]’, probably the renowned *El Diaro* newspaper published for Big Apple’s Hispanic community, praised Champ’s performance and confessed that Sanchez had been ‘lucky to win’.

Meanwhile, according to Awudu Ali in the *Spectator* (*Sp*) (August 21, 1982, 7), fans in Ghana wanted a home show – a fight against his compatriot Thunder Clotthey in defence of the Commonwealth crown. This did not materialise because Champ’s handlers engaged him in some build-up fights outside Ghana towards a possible go at the title after a Sanchez-La Porte fight. The fights were also intended to, first, improve his verve and ‘toughen his muscles, build his stamina’, which were physical qualities which Awudu Ali observed that Champ needed then (*Sp*, August 21, 1982, 7) and, second, financially ‘build’ his pocket and that of his handlers.

Meanwhile, fans who kept vigil on July 21 to support him felt that he had lost to Sanchez because of poor judging.¹⁶ Therefore, as Awudu Ali observed,

[It] came as a relief to all those who loved fair play when promoter Don King made it known that he would consider Azumah for the title [possibly a rematch with Sanchez] after a couple of fights in the States. (*Sp*, August 21, 1982, 7)

He ‘would have loved to meet Sanchez in a return match but this was not destined’ (*Sp*, August 21, 1982, 7). He was the last that Sanchez fought. On August 12, 1982, the boxing world and Sanchez’s native Santiago Tianguistenco heard about



Sanchez's death in a gruesome motor accident¹⁷ in Mexico City. Champ and the sport lost a great fighter, but that was not the only loss. Azumah Nelson also lost his coach Robertson to death. The outcome of the Azumah Nelson-Sanchez fight robbed Robertson of glory. Robertson's health started to deteriorate and quickly led to his demise in November 1982.

Meanwhile, Champ's handlers lobbied for a showdown between Champ and Juan La Porte, who was an automatic candidate for a bout for the world title which Sanchez had left vacant. Conversely, the WBC pitted Mario Marinda against La Porte. Miranda should have boxed Sanchez on July 21, 1982, instead of Champ, so when the opportunity for the contest for the vacant title emerged, the WBC found Marinda better positioned, not more capable, than the Ghanaian to compete against La Porte. Nevertheless, Champ remained calm and hoped to meet the winner before long. After beating Miranda through a round ten KO at 'the Garden' on September 15, La Porte avoided a challenge from the Ghanaian boxer. In the interim, the latter embarked on a triumphant spree in build-up fights. His handlers also campaigned for a title fight for him, securing a slot in 1984. The WBC endorsed him to fight Wilfredo 'Bazooka' Gomez, a fistic genius¹⁸ from the poor area of Las Monjas in San Juan, Puerto Rico, who proceeded from the super-bantamweight to take the featherweight title from the talented La Porte by a 12th-round unanimous decision.

The Golden Fleece: Azumah Nelson grabs the WBC Featherweight Title, 1984

Champ 'victimised' about six fighters within and outside Africa before he fought Gomez. These build-up fights attracted the strong interest of the PNDC, its Chairman, D.F. Annan, and Amarkai Amarteifio. The Secretary for Youth and Sports threw his personal and ministerial support behind Champ and encouraged him to excel in his and Ghana's interests.

As Amarkai Amarteifio recalled in a personal interview on December 15, 2010, the year 1983 was a period when 'nature and man [Nigeria] conspired against Ghana'. The country experienced a serious drought and numerous bush fires which destroyed much of its fertile land and farms. Food became scarce. Moreover, Nigeria deported thousands of Ghanaians to Ghana, which worsened the food situation. The country's economy ailed, and prices of basic consumables soared. During this period, Azumah did some fighting outside Ghana and occasionally escaped the hardships temporarily, improving his record by defeating four contestants. Before these four victories in 1983, he registered a round five TKO over the undefeated fringe contender Irving Mitchell in McAfee, New Jersey, on October 31, 1982. He beat Ricky Wallace on February 12, 1983, at Public Hall, in Cleveland, Ohio, by a win in round ten. Then,

Alvin Fowler succumbed to a round two TKO at Showboat Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas on August 17. On September 23, in a match refereed by Pete Rademacher, Alberto Collazo suffered a TKO in round two at Richfield Coliseum, Richfield, Ohio. Back in Africa, he defended the Commonwealth crown on November 23 by handing a second defeat to Kabiru Akindele through a KO in round nine in Lagos. He continued to eye the big title. Amarkai Amarteifio hoped that he would seize it soon because

the country needed ... an international laurel ... in ... sports especially boxing ... even though the conspiracy of nature and man had brought hardship. People needed something to smile [and cheer] about so I encouraged this promising boxer [Azumah Nelson] to work hard to get the title for Ghana and himself.

In 1984, he outboxed the skilful Hector Cortez in round ten at the Convention Centre in Las Vegas on March 9. His handlers implored the WBC to grant him a title bout because he had been in the 'wilderness' for a long time, even though he was the 'best' contender around. The WBC obliged. The titlist, Gomez, accepted the challenge. In the eyes of any fair-minded boxer, Las Vegas or New York would have been fair grounds for both boxers; but, no, the fight did not occur in New York, Accra, Las Vegas or any of the venues Champ was familiar with. Secretary of Sports Amarkai Amarteifio reassured him of Ghana's solid support and promised to accompany him to wherever the bout occurred. The fight was finally shifted to Puerto Rico, but this did not perturb the title-hungry contender. Used to the strangeness and intimidation that accompanied fights fought without home turf and familiar terrain advantage, he agreed to chase Gomez to his country. He had stints of training with F.A. Moses, a Ghanaian coach who had coached the Black Bombers for some time. On his quest for the coveted world title, the ultimate 'Golden Fleece', he journeyed to San Juan, determined to teach Gomez a lesson and make him repent for derogatorily referring to Ghanaians 'as hungry people' because of the shortage of food in 1983 (Azumah Nelson in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010). He also wanted him to 'regret' saying that the challenger would be 'hungrier' after tasting defeat. Amarteifio continued:

Gomez said these things when the two boxers met for the traditional weighing before fights ... I told Azumah to 'teach Gomez a lesson' ... [I] ... said to him: 'This fight is for Ghana. Close your eyes and visualise Ghana, the airport, the cheering crowd and Chairman Rawlings, bare-chested and walking towards you to congratulate you for taking the title. Can you see?' Azumah responded 'Yes'. Then I said to him: 'That is what awaits you. So go now and get the title for the country.' He then told me he would do that.

He fought with this in mind on December 8. Amarteifio believes that 'Azumah Nelson fought for the country and Africa' in front of a crowd of 'about forty to fifty



thousand live audience,’ (John Kermah in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010) and de-titled Gomez by a round eleven KO in a match refereed by Octavio Meyran at the Hiram Bithorn Stadium in San Juan.¹⁹ He had trailed on the scorecards of judges Dick Young, Marcello Bertini and Mike Jacobs until he was further inspired by his trainer corner man Bill Prezant and Amarkai Amarteifio, who asked him to ‘pull his weight’. Amarteifio went near his corner, at the end of round ten, and shouted in Ga, ‘*shi le o gbe shi*’ (‘push him/knock him down’) (Amarkai Amarteifio in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010). The challenger rallied strongly in the last two rounds to ‘demolish’ Gomez. Elatedly, the PNDC Secretary for Youth and Sports jumped into the ring and raised the new champion shoulder high to celebrate his triumph. This scene of a politician ‘raising’ a sportsperson – a politician idolising and venerating a sportsperson – was unambiguous evidence and testament to the tremendous power inherent in sports. Amarkai Amarteifio recounted:

I was happy ... he brought glory to Ghana and himself. I knew Ghanaians would ... smile even though they had encountered a lot of economic and social hardships in the last two years. The victory indeed did that. Ghanaians rejoiced in his and the country’s accomplishment in boxing.

The ring announcer proclaimed to the world a new WBC featherweight champion, ‘Azumah Nelson, from Ghana’. This was when he earned the alias ‘The Terrible Warrior’ from his fans. Significantly, the fight fulfilled his dream of becoming a famous world champion, conferred pride and cash rewards on him, his promoter and managers, avenged D.K. Poison, and gave satisfaction and joy to Ghana. For three years he defended the ‘royal’ title against the challenge of six aggressive and skilful boxers.

He returned to Ghana, receiving a hero’s welcome at the national airport from government dignitaries and the public, including members of the Adedemkpo Azumah Nelson Boxing Fan Club of Timber Market. He paid a courtesy call on Chairman Rawlings, who registered the nation’s appreciation for his feat. The Ga mantse and his elders received him at the royal court as an esteemed dignitary and hero of the Ga-Mashie nation. He appeared in several television and radio shows and sports programmes as a national idol and was the guest of honour at various private and national functions. True to his expectations, his social image and identity were quickly transformed through boxing and a world title. He incarnated an international celebrity. For the first eight months, he revelled in his new-found fame and paid attention to his family and friends. This dimension of his life, including his marriage, is discussed in the next chapter.

Having restored his battered body and psyche, he returned to the ring. His first encounter was against the tough Chilean Juvenal Ordenes at Tamiani Fairgrounds

Auditorium in Miami, Florida, on September 6, 1985. Referee Steve Crosson stopped the fight after the Chilean suffered a round five KO.

Defending his title and reputation, 1985 to 1987

Subsequently, discussions and informal requests about a possible showdown between the champion and the skilful WBA world featherweight champion, Finbarr Patrick McGuigan alias Barry 'Clones Cyclone' McGuigan, emerged from international boxing journalists and connoisseurs and fans. Before any formal agreement could be reached by the managers of two boxers for a fight to reveal 'the best fighter in the featherweight division', Champ's handlers detoured into a different fighting engagement prepared soon after his bout with Ordenes. Accordingly, he bravely fought against Pat Cowdell in Birmingham, England, in October 1985. The contest was promoted by Frank Warren²⁰ of Sports Network and Don King. The venue was advantageous to Cowdell, whose professional debut had been a win against Albert Coley on May 7, 1977. Although boxing cognoscenti and dabblers predicted difficulty for the champion from Ghana, he was confident of a win in the challenger's own territory.

I remember telling the [English] fans that they should come to the fight early, because we goin' to finish the fight early ... but you know as a Black man say something they don't believe him until they see it with their ... eyes. (Azumah Nelson interview in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010)

The British were hopeful of victory for their home boy who had given Salvador Sanchez 'a hard time' in a close and hard-fought bout in Houston, Texas, in 1981. Apart from against Sanchez, Cowdell had lost on two other occasions. In 1978, Alan Robertson stopped him by a second round TKO and he lost on points to Dave Needham in 1979.

The night for the fight finally arrived. The YouTube video *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell* shows the National Exhibition Centre, on October 12, buzzing with a patriotic British crowd. The atmosphere further became jubilant when the Union Jack was raised in the ring and the anthem 'God save the Queen' was played. Deafening boos greeted the champion when he was introduced. He smiled and calmly waved. Fresh in his mind were the uncomfortable boos and scornful remarks that some hooligans had earlier directed at his person, and Cowdell's braggadocio. He contemplated victory. 'Finish him quickly and go to bed!'. 'Surprise and shock them!' he thought. Referee Octavio Meyran spelt out the rules. Awaiting the crowd was one of the most nerve-jangling scenes ever observed at the WBC featherweight championship. The bell sounded and the two went straight to the 'kill'. Meanwhile, spectators were thronging in, corner men were finding seats, and journalists and



photographers were still looking for good views. Presto! A punch flew from him. *Wham!* Within a couple of seconds, Pat crumpled like a string puppet and hit the canvas. *Poom!* He remained still in a supine position. Almost in unison, everyone asked, 'What happened?' Champ had ended the fight after two minutes twenty-four seconds into round one with a murderous left *sucker punch*,²¹ which translated into a *Sunday punch*.²² It temporarily broke Pat's link with his consciousness. This predicted KO came rather too fast and unexpectedly. The home crowd was devastated, and their fighter's ego was shattered. Judges Harry Gibbs, Roy Ankrah and Richard Steele had a short night and easy verdict. Some of his close fans and corner men and handlers ran into the ring and carried the elated boxer high to congratulate him.²³ Joyously his wife embraced him. Cowdell, the European super-featherweight champion, certainly had not detected the power-filled unorthodox left, a hybrid of an upper-cut and a crossing hook, before it exploded like a radar-guided missile on his chin. 'That was sensational!' said the in-the-ring post-fight interviewer to Cowdell. Amidst tears, the inconsolable boxer responded: 'I am the most disappointed man in the world', confessed, '... he was a better fighter', and walked away. Champ knew he was number one in the WBC 126-pound fight category, and Cowdell certainly could not disagree with such thinking! Joe Aggrey of *PDG* (October 14, 1985, 1) wrote that although it had been perhaps the shortest KO in the history of the division, it possibly made him the hardest puncher in the division then. Champ iterated the frustration that made him do what he did during the post-match interview.

'Absolutely shocking', the interviewer said of the KO. The Champ replied, 'That is right. Yu kno', I came in to knock him out in the first round'. He added,

That is what I make (made) my mind [to do] because the people here [in Birmingham] didn't treat us good, yu kno'. They ... making all kinds of ways [insulting, calling names, and booing] to get the title from us. But ... I want[ed] to prove to them that I am the best in the world. (*Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2*, n.d.).

His gestures and articulated words in the interview were heavily nuanced with Pan African and trans-nationalist messages. Boxing and the uncommon diplomatic platform and international exposure that the sport gave him allowed him to articulate his personal dissatisfaction about any unfairness his team had experienced in Birmingham, and his conceptual interpretation of his national and Pan African character and views. Symbolically showing his anger at any abuse of his person and team, obviously by hooligans, he impulsively picked up the Ghanaian flag and, displaying it, clearly affirmed his pride in being Ghanaian and, trans-nationally, African. 'This is my national flag', he said, 'I am proud of it and I am proud of Africa, yu kno' wha' I mean'. He was also a Pan Africanist. Throughout his distinguished boxing career, which contributed to anchoring Ghana in the international consciousness,

his sense of Pan Africanism, verbalised and symbolised in Birmingham, made him see his victories and successes as products from and for African creativity and ability.

Explaining the KO, he said,

as soon as the bell go on he just come straight to me, and I say O.K. ... am gonna knock him out in first round ... He start using the jabs. I start bobbing it, and I got him ... oh yu kno' ... I am too bad baby!

He challenged big shot Barry McGuigan for a unification of titles fight. He taunted: 'I want ... that girl, and I will knock him out ... I am ready to fight McGuigan anytime, anywhere'. He added: 'There is no way he can go four rounds with me ... I got power, I got experience ... I got everything too much and I want that girl'. The Irish boxer was a 'girl' because 'she don't [sic] want to fight me. She is scared of me. She knows who I am and what I can do', he mentioned. '... [H]is trainers don't want [him] to fight me. I took that title from a young man. Ei, any old man who want to fight me I'm a kill him'. Joe Aggrey of *PDG* (October 14, 1985, 1) reported that after the upset from the KO, a few disappointed hooligans and intoxicated zealous supporters of Cowdell in Birmingham behaved in a disorderly manner. Azumah Nelson recalled that some rained uncomplimentary names on the champion, while others threw beverage containers into the crowd and smashed chairs and furniture (pers. comm., March 23, 2010).

The situation on the other side of the Atlantic – Africa – was different. Ghana went into ecstatic celebrations and parties. Die-hard fans revived the long-standing conversation about 'who-is-the-best' fighter between him and McGuigan, who had defeated the Panamanian Eusebio Pedroza on June 8, 1985 to become the WBA featherweight champion.

McGuigan's manager, Barney Eastwood, was present when Champ beat Cowdell and gained his easiest pay-day. Did he think 'Will Barry suffer the same predicament if he meets Azumah Nelson in Belfast or Dublin or anywhere? Will I make a big financial profit or in the case of a loss will Don King take the bigger part of the fight's purse?' Well, Eastwood did not engage his ward in a fight against the Ghanaian. A match would have registered as a historic great. So, what happened to the world title ambitions of Cowdell? They were not realised.²⁴ In contrast, Champ rolled on after 1985. He had two strong bouts in 1986 and retained the title. He first beat the future world champion Marcos Villasana on February 25, in the 'Fight for Life', which John Thomas refereed. The judges were James Jen-Kin, Rudy Ortega and Lou Filippo. He should have fought Villasana earlier in April 1985 in a fight which, according to John Baiden in *The Mirror* (Accra, February 22, 1986, 7), was labelled by the American press as 'The bloodiest fight of the year (1985)' of the big punchers in the featherweight division. However, complications from appendicitis made him



pull out. The world was deprived of that 'bloodiest fight', but it saw in Miami and Birmingham how merciless he could be without appendicitis.

After twelve rounds of fighting, Villasana lost by a majority decision at the Forum, Inglewood, California. Since he had become professional in 1978, Villasana had lost only four times, including against the Mexican Lenny Valdez on July 6, 1985 during a warm-up fight in anticipation of a fight with Champ,²⁵ tied once, unleashed a melange of 41 KOs and TKOs, and defeated other boxers on PTS and an SD in 51 fights. He proved tougher than Cowdell.

Before the 'Fight for Life', Champ's handlers made overtures to McGuigan's camp but, as Eugene Thompson reported in the *GT* on February 22, 1988, it avoided million-dollar offers for a showdown. However, the idea of an encounter between him and the Irish idol lingered in informal and formal discussions of the press, boxing gurus and fans. It was later in February 1988, when he was preparing to fight the WBC-nominated contender Mario 'Sabache' (or Azabache) Martinez for the vacant WBC super-featherweight title that McGuigan, whose crown was taken by Steve Cruz from the USA on June 26, 1986, challenged him to a fight for the super-featherweight title. He declined this late request. McGuigan had earlier defeated a stand-in challenger, Danilo 'Cuero Duro' Cabrera from Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic, in Dublin, on February 15, 1986. This pyrrhic defeat compelled British newspapers to ask McGuigan, who finished the fight in round fourteen with six stitches, to fight the Ghanaian to prove whether he was the best featherweight. The latter had been ready for the Irish boxer. However, it was McGuigan's delays which caused the Ghanaian boxer a mandatory fight with Villasana, a ready contender, to keep his record and reputation intact.

The joy which his defeat of Villasana, Mexico's featherweight champion and number one contender to the WBC title, brought to Ghanaians and Africans in general was soon threatened. An allegation of misconduct was made against the Ghanaian boxer. Proved culpable, he stood to forfeit his title – a treasured prize of his country and continent. What exactly happened? *The Day* of New London, Connecticut, reported on March 15, 1986 that the California State Athletic Commission (CSAC) had accused Azumah Nelson of using a stimulant – phenylpropanolamine, a stimulant decongestant and anorectic agent – in the fight against Villasana. Was the charge true or was a faceless malicious cabal trying to tarnish his hard-earned reputation and rob Africa of the world title? Was exoneration possible? The ramifications of the CSAC's assertion that an anti-illegal drug test conducted on him proved positive was disconcerting to the government and people of Ghana, and many followers of world professional boxing. April 11, 1986 was set by the WBC and the CSAC for the official hearing of this cause célèbre. 'It was not true. I did not take any dope ... I was tougher. I beat him without dope', Azumah Nelson recounted in a personal interview

on October 5, 2009. To Amarkai Amarteifio, it was 'simply a malicious endeavour to deprive Azumah Nelson of his title' and, according to Azumahn Nelson, '... a plan by an individual or people to rob me of the championship belt'.

The operations of the CSAC were usually considered authentic and clean in California, so was that why the WBC selected it to perform the delicate mandatory urinalysis? Why did the CSAC not follow the *modus operandi* for an anti-narcotic test through and through? Although the champion left Los Angeles for Ghana six days after the bout, the results were only communicated to him when he reached Ghana on March 11. There was a hiatus in communication for fifteen clear days, which went against the normative that the result of a test should be known within one week after a bout and urine samples have been obtained. He suspected that something irregular was going on in some 'alley' and felt that 'someone was after my downfall'.

Was his thought about a possible plot of chicanery a concocted weak counter? Was he paranoid? Perhaps not! There is more to sports than the games people play. They have political, ideological and economic purposes, and serve such interests for individuals, groups, countries and continents. Insight into the arena of the sports tradition and boxing culture in which Azumah Nelson operated reveals instances where certain scandals, accusations, personal anti-establishment convictions, and incidents have happened both in and outside the ring, without having anything to do with the 'punch-for-pay' sport at all. The cases of Jack Johnson and Muhammad Ali, two 'Black' boxers, are illustrative.

The boastful Johnson flaunted an ostentatious and lavish lifestyle to the disdain of a government that was not kind and permissive to his racial group. That political establishment subsequently engineered his troubles with the legal arm of the state and his ultimate fall. In 1967, an angry political establishment that knew how to politicise sports and frustrate sportspersons that it did not like, suspended Ali's licence, stripped him of his title and banned him from boxing, thus exiling him from boxing for three years during which he was ostracised by the boxing fraternity. Why did the power of the government and politicians indict Ali, who was just a boxer? Just a boxer? He was too proud a Black boxer. He converted to Elijah Muhammad's Lost-Found Nation of Islam, a strong critic of racism and the excesses of the 'white' political power structure of the USA, and claiming to be a conscientious objector, refused to be conscripted to Vietnam to fight 'America's war'. He found it illogical to risk his life in a war that was in the interests of that oppressive establishment. 'I ain't got nothing against no Vietcong', he explained his resistance. He became a hero for many pacifists in the USA and especially African-Americans who opposed fighting a war for a political structure that peripherised them in society because of their racial background. The peeved government disgraced 'the Greatest' because, unlike many of his kind, he, using the powerful platform and voice of boxing, 'talked too much'.



This bad exemplar had to be silenced to protect the establishment's political interests. To align people with its politics, the government outside the ring displayed its power and took the title away from Ali.

These anecdotes provide an alternative understanding of Azumah Nelson's predicament in 1986 and his rebuttal and uninterrupted insistence that it was all an intrigue. Deception? Was the CSAC trying to accomplish a feat that no boxer had accomplished in the ring – take the title from Azumah Nelson? Was a powerful group trying to disgrace this fighter who, as an inspiration and proud symbol to Ghanaian and African youth, easily waved the Ghanaian flag in the ring, and told the world how proud he was about his flag and Africa? I have mentioned how a powerful establishment like the USA government had interfered in the profession of 'the Louisville Lip' and stripped him of his boxing title. Ostracising him for nearly four years, this frustrated the boxer and caused him to lose a time of peak performance in his career. So, were some authorities trying to silence this loudmouth champion boxer from Ghana who felt he had every right to be vocal about his exploits in the ring? Perhaps, yes. Why not? He was proud about his cultural and racial background, which in certain places, like Birmingham, had suffered derision. He spoke his mind and announced his pride to the world because he was the only Black continental African – an African youth – who held a world title at the time. Believing he owed the title to the youth of Africa, he felt right about his sharp articulations, which he used to convince the youth to recognise him as their ambassador and champion, make them proud about their identity and origin, and inspire them to greater heights in their endeavours. Maybe, like the talkative Ali and his Black Muslim-inspired anti-status-quo utterances, he 'the Ga-Mashie Lip' also 'talked too much' and his showmanship offended influential people and establishments who attempted to break him. His physician, Bart Plange, queried that if the substance allegedly found in the supposed urine sample of the boxer could induce drowsiness and depression, how any wise boxer would take it before a match. Could it be that someone was trying to induce those states in the boxer? Did the saga and hullabaloo break his spirit? He recounted, 'I was upset, not discouraged'. He felt disgraced because the CSAC proceeded without any substantiated evidence to widely publicise the so-called results.

The world waited to know whether he was a genuine sportsman or a dishonest imposter and charlatan. Clearly, a humiliation of this national idol and ambassador, which threatened his title, meant a perilous dishonour to Ghana's fine international reputation. He was a national asset and symbol of inspiration, discipline, dedication and success to the youth, so the PNDC made this a matter of national concern which the Secretary of Youth and Sports Amarkai Amarteifio pursued in all seriousness. He assembled experts including medical doctors to probe the case. In a personal

interview on December 15, 2010 he observed: 'That shows you that Azumah Nelson was very important to the government and country and we had trust in his honesty and sense of fair play in boxing'. Flaws in the test procedure and the contention were identified and communicated, through the GBA, to the CSAC and the WBC. The ministry in charge of sports protested that the charge was unfounded. Fans and admirers protested and demanded a review of the report and procedure of the CASC.

On the other side of the Atlantic, José Suleiman insisted that in fairness the rules should be pursued, and the second bottle of the boxer's specimen should be produced and examined to ascertain the veracity of the claim of the CASC. If the examination result did not support the contended 'first report', the WBC would not accept that the boxer had violated any of its regulations and declare that the name and flawless private and sports life of a WBC champion had been stained. A high-powered delegation from Ghana, which knew a blunder had been committed against the boxer, went to the CASC board's public meeting on April 11. According to Amarteifio, 'We [the side of the accused] requested for the [unclean] specimen B, but they could not produce it'. Instead of taking and making two separate specimen samples, one sample was taken and divided into two bottles. This error in the procedure and others made the 'findings' unreliable. Ultimately, the CSAC realised that it would be honourable to beat a retreat. It withdrew its invalid allegation and acquitted the boxer. 'They did not take any disciplinary action against him because there wasn't enough evidence to do so', the CASC's assistant inspector George Johnson said (*New Sunday Times*, Kuala Lumpur, April 13, 1986, 23). Although the exoneration, by implication, gave him a clean bill of health and strengthened his reputation as a 'clean' and outstanding African sportsman and a national hero, he was not happy. He declared in the aftermath of the hearing that,

It is a farce, politics, all kind of stuff ... I don't know what they are trying to do. They say 'We free you', okay you free me. But don't try to disgrace me. You have to do what the law says. You can't say something that is not true. (*New Sunday Times*, Kuala Lumpur, April 13, 1986, 23)

Amarteifio was adamant that the boxer did not believe in drugs, but in the potency of faith and physical and mental training for stamina, weight check and winnings (pers. comm., December 15, 2010). A physician called Schwartz who examined him and Villasana before and after the match is reported to have testified that he had never benefitted from any drug or narcotic substance. He stayed off drugs and retired without showing physical signs of a boxer who kept a 'gloomy' secret of drug use during his heyday as a boxer.²⁶

He was grateful for triumphing over a charge of dope use – one of the many major trials in the dangerous and intricate scandal-prone world of international



professional boxing. His fans were glad that his status was safe and the title was where 'it belonged'. Some cynical boxing pundits, especially in Mexico, called for a rematch within ninety days, to decide who was the superior fighter. He would indulge Villasana in a rematch in 1987. Meanwhile, he placated his followers with a round-ten TKO defeat of the Dominican Danilo Cabrera on June 22, 1986, in a fight which Jesus Arias Torres refereed at Hiram Bithorn Stadium, in Puerto Rico. At home, he kayoed fellow Ghanaian Aaron Duribe in round six in Accra, on December 13, to close his chapter of impressive victories for 1986.

The Don King–Ringcraft–Azumah Nelson triad searched for fights of glory in 1987. Fans anticipated a rematch with Villasana. However, tardiness by the boxers' camps to reach an agreement and a date for the contest delayed that fight. In the interim, the champion fought Mauro 'Betillo' Gutierrez, from Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, at the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas on March 7. Under the refereeing of Davey Pearl and judging of Marty Sammon, Keith MacDonald and Tony Perez, Gutierrez was kayoed in round six. By early August it seemed that the rematch with Villasana was imminent. Villasana wanted revenge badly. Mindful of the past allegations of dope use – a reminder from history – the champion garnered his strength and trained to beat the challenger and prove that he could defeat Villasana as many times as he wanted (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). His promise to fans was an encore, 'this time with more devastating consequences' (*PDG*, August 29, 1987, 7). Again, Villasana's old nemesis beat him at the Olympic Auditorium, Los Angeles, California, by a unanimous decision after twelve rounds of fighting, refereed by John Thomas and judged by Harry Gibbs, Chuck Hassett and Rudy Ortega on August 29, 1987. His victory proved his unseen critics and accusers wrong. When all evidence is analysed, the logical conclusion is that Villasana, a boxer with an aggressive rough-tough style, was twice a victim of Azumah Nelson's natural stamina, fistic prowess, experience and – maybe – luck.

Notes

- 1 Many members of the Captan family were enthusiasts of one or more sports such as golf, horse racing, tennis, polo and football. Ghana's renowned female golfer Mona Captan is from that family.
- 2 'Pug' is a slang term for a boxer.
- 3 A featherweight generally weighs in at 126 pounds (57 kg). It used to be 114 pounds in the USA.
- 4 Duff was a British boxer who became a renowned international matchmaker and manager from the late 1950s onwards. He promoted several top fighters and worked with several world-class titlists, including Azumah Nelson.

- 5 Catchweight is between two recognised weights, mutually agreed upon by two boxing participants.
- 6 See interview of Azumah Nelson in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson* (2010).
- 7 Nelson, [Samuel] Azumah. 2010. Interview. *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*.
- 8 ‘Solon’, originating from the name of an Athenian lawmaker, is a boxing term which means a boxing commissioner.
- 9 In boxing terminology ‘palooka’ alias ‘a tomato can’ or ‘a ham andegger’ is a ‘nobody’ boxer who loses before the fourth or sixth rounds to starter career boxers.
- 10 They are recreational social music and dances usually performed by men and women from the coastal area in Accra, Ghana.
- 11 See the full fight on <http://www.boxingvideonline.com/2008/04/salvador-sanchez-vs-azumah-nelson.html>.
- 12 A non-registered amateur or professional boxer.
- 13 Nelson, [Samuel] Azumah. 2010. Interview. *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*.
- 14 Born in 1930, this renowned sports journalist ‘was inducted into the National Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame in March 2000 ... In May 2000, he received the Red Smith Award – the highest honour given by the Associated Press Sports Editors’. See ‘Jerry Izenberg,’ *New Jersey Boxing Hall of Fame*. n.d. <<http://www.njboxinghof.org/cgi-bin/henryseehof.pl?30>>.
- 15 These statements were culled from observations that were, reportedly, made by Jerry Izenberg in July 1982 (DG, July 27, 1982, 7).
- 16 The GBA organised a vigil on July 21 at the Bukom Square in Accra to show solidarity and support for the boxer. See ‘Vigil at Bukom,’ (DG, July 15, 1982, 6).
- 17 Sanchez was preparing for a rematch with La Porte set for September. He was posthumously inducted into the International Boxing Hall of Fame in 1991. See ‘Sanchez – Great Champ’ (DG, August 14, 1982, 7) for a short biography and career history of the boxer.
- 18 Born on October 29, 1956, he became a three-time world champion. He won 88 per cent of his bouts by KO. In 2003, *The Ring* ranked him 13th on a list of the 100 all-time greatest punchers.
- 19 See *Wilfredo Gomez vs Azumah Nelson – Parte 4* [sic], YouTube, uploaded July 29, 2008.
- 20 This prominent English boxing manager and promoter was elected and inducted to the International Boxing Hall of Fame in December 2007 and June 2008, respectively.
- 21 An unexpected punch that catches a person completely off guard.
- 22 A hard punch and KO blow that incapacitates a boxer.
- 23 See also *Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2*, (n.d.).
- 24 He fought eight more times, won the British super-featherweight title and retired in 1988, after a TKO loss to Floyd Havard.



- 25 Other defeats came from Mario Miranda in 1982, Ambrosio Luna in 1979 and Artemio Ramirez in 1979.
- 26 Some famous boxers with a secret life of drug use, and chemical and alcohol abuse, were Wilfredo Gomez, John(ny) Lee Tapia, and Pernell Whitaker.

The legend continues: The glory years

As a featherweight maestro and supremo, Azumah Nelson prepared for the super-featherweight level. As he told me in a personal interview on October 5, 2009, his handlers 'were confident in me. They and I wanted to take the title in 1988'. They were also aware of the 'big money up there'. They succeeded lobbying for a contest for the vacant title. In November of 1987, he was all set to move up. As reported by Eugene Thompson in the *PDG* on November 12, 1987, Al Braverman,¹ Don King's director of boxing, told *Boxing News* that the graduation was necessary 'because there was just no one left to give Azumah a fight at featherweight.' Braverman added that after Azumah Nelson seized the super-featherweight title, he 'could go up to lightweight and 'lick' the winner out of Chávez² and Rosario.'³ Eugene Thompson added that Braverman deemed the boxer 'a throwback to the old days', referring to the legendary Sandy Saddler, world featherweight and super-featherweight champion who flourished in the 1940s and 1950s, as someone the boxer would have defeated if they had been contemporaries. Luckily for the boxer, Don King proposed a doubleheader to the Home Box Office (HBO) television network in the USA for a go at the vacant super-featherweight title. Tentatively conceived for March or April, the fight was shifted to February 29 because of strong public fervour and interest. In an article titled 'Azumah', the *GT* reported on January 23, 1988 that, anticipating a possible fight against Australia's Lester Ellis, first contender to the super-featherweight title, Champ anxiously departed on January 22 for the USA to train.

Azumah Nelson graduates to the super-featherweight level

Meanwhile, Australia's Jeff 'Marrickville Mauler' Fenech, the WBC bantamweight champion, made a strong eleventh-hour manoeuvre to challenge him to acquire the WBC featherweight title for Australia in 1988, which, incidentally, was the bicentennial anniversary year of European settlement in Australia (*GS*, January 18,



1988, 4). Confident after kayoing Osmar Alfredo Avila in 56 seconds in a non-title fight on December 11, 1987, Fenech made Azumah Nelson his priority. A fight between the two promised a first-class show. This did not happen, because as by January 1988, when Fenech had fully grown into a featherweight, Azumah Nelson was moving up (*GS*, January 18, 1988, 4). The *Ghanaian Voice* (*GV*) of January 26–31, 1988 ran an article titled ‘Azumah off to Fight for New Title’, reporting that Ringcraft, which the Sports Writers Association of Ghana (SWAG) voted ‘Boxing Managers of the Year (1987)’, wanted a higher laurel for him in 1988 and so it did not reverse the forward progression of their ward to satisfy Fenech’s request. In fact, the stepping up of Champ was Ringcraft’s priority as it had not fulfilled a promise it made to Ghanaian fans in December 1987 that, depending on the availability of foreign exchange to cater for the purse of a challenger (*PDG*, December 30, 1987, 7), the boxer would defend his title in Ghana in 1988.

In the estimation of Oko Kwatekwei and Ringcraft, 1987 was ‘a good year for Ghanaian boxing’ (*PDG*, December 30, 1987, 7). Champ was impressive. Ringcraft’s ‘the Marvellous’ Nana Yaw Konadu, the ABU flyweight champion, also kayoed Zambia’s Albert Musankabala in round six, in Accra, and snatched the vacant Commonwealth flyweight title on October 10, 1987. Ringcraft hoped for higher standards and more glory in 1988 (*PDG*, December 30, 1987, 7). An Azumah Nelson–Jeff Fenech fight was a possibility, but not an immediate priority of Ringcraft, the Kings or Champ. Fenech restlessly waited and had his first encounter with Champ in 1991.

As reported in the (*GV*) of January 26–31, 1988, Champ’s camp knew that winning the vacant super-featherweight title meant relinquishing his featherweight title. Thus, a fight for the title was a serious opportunity that he could not afford to miss. Meanwhile, the WBC rated him and other African boxers high in its latest rankings which were done in Mexico City. Kenya’s Patrick Lumumba was ranked fourth to the cruiserweight title held by Puerto Rico’s Carlos De Leon. Joe Lasisi of Nigeria was rated fifth contender to the light-heavyweight title held by Canada’s Don Lalonde, and Uganda’s John Mugabi was ranked first to the super-welterweight title held by Gianfranco Rosi of Italy. According to the *GT* (February 2, 1988, 7), heavyweight champion Mike Tyson was named as boxer of the month of January.

Champ trained intensely at Don King’s gymnasium in Cleveland, Ohio, in readiness for Lester Ellis. He hoped to become the first Ghanaian world title holder in a lighter division to advance quickly to possess the world title of a heavier weight division. His handlers and the WBC sanctioned February 25 and the fabulous Great Western Forum in Inglewood, California as the date and venue for the fight. Unexpectedly, because of an injury and for personal reasons, Ellis pulled out of the fight deal early in February, 1988. The lacuna gave Mario Martinez an opportunity.

Fortunately, the quick campaign of this former challenger of Julio César Chávez persuaded the WBC to authorise an Azumah Nelson–Mario Martinez bout alongside a twelve-round WBC super-bantamweight title bout between two former WBC bantamweight champions from Mexico – Carlos Zarate and Daniel Zaragoza.

The Great Western Forum was filled to the rafters with boxing fans. The evening's bouts, which involved three Mexicans, attracted a large Hispanic crowd. After twelve rounds, judges Rudy Ortega, Terry Smith and Marty Sammon scored the fight 115–113, 115–113 and 113–114 respectively, in a split decision in favour of the Ghanaian boxer. Hispanic sports commentators and newspapers were dissatisfied. Perhaps it was Azumah Nelson's superior punches, point-winning jabs, and/or his luck that gave him the title? He returned to Ghana as a proud super-featherweight champion. However, the Mexican's group petitioned for a rematch. As he recalled in a personal interview on October 5, 2009: 'I was not scared. I respected Martinez ... I knew I would win... I knew that I would give it to them soon'.

Meanwhile, other qualified contenders lobbied him to a challenge. Champ accepted that of Lupe Suarez, a former world champion and fine southpaw from Corpus Christi, Texas, USA. Suarez became his first casualty when he became *Rex* of the super-featherweights.

Rex of the super-featherweights

'The best boxer nobody knows'
(Timothy W. Smith, *NYT*, July 11, 1998)

They fought on June 25, 1988 at Trump Plaza Hotel in Atlantic City, New Jersey, USA. In the early part of the bout, the challenger's foot accidentally tripped the champion to the canvas. It was inconsequential because Suarez, whose tale of the tape revealed two losses and twenty-five winnings, ultimately suffered a KO in round nine from Azumah Nelson, who had to his credit one loss and twenty-eight wins, out of which twenty were KOs. Suarez got up but referee Tony Perez stopped the fight twenty-seven seconds into the round (*Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1988). The champion described Suarez as the toughest he had fought to date because of the awkwardness of his unorthodox south-paw stance. Orthodox boxers are easily disorientated when they fight southpaws. That is why the old tongue-in-cheek boxing idiom 'Southpaws should be drowned at birth' is popular among orthodox boxers.

Would Azumah Nelson survive another southpaw in a different engagement? Time would tell.

Meanwhile, speculation about an Azumah Nelson–Barry McGuigan clash continued among boxing pundits and British and Irish newspapers. Simultaneously,



Martinez's camp and Mexican radio and newspapers intensified their call for a rematch.

Azumah Nelson and the HIV saga, 1988

Because of a conditional promise they had made in 1987 to Ghanaian fans to stage a title defence fight in Ghana, the champion and his handlers, whose glorious globetrotting had swelled their purse handsomely with foreign currency, managed and fulfilled their promise late in 1988. Better late than never! The bout, incidentally, cheered up Ghanaians and, specifically, exploded the rumour that he was weak because of a myth that he had contracted the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Stardom has negative price tags: scandals, false accusations, set-ups and invasions of privacy by paparazzi. For a second time, Azumah Nelson's name and person were maligned. First there had been the alleged use of illicit drugs, and now it was an assumed acquisition of the 'deadly' HIV.

In August 1988, he and Ghanaians faced a pernicious rumour that he was a carrier of HIV and therefore had AIDS. Incredible! Naturally, a mixture of shock and anger gripped sections of the Ghanaian fans and general populace. Some described it as a smear campaign orchestrated against their national and African hero. The telephone lines of Ghana-based media houses, especially the GBC, had heavy traffic of calls to enquire about the veracity of the story about the boxer's acquisition of HIV or express their condemnation of what many deemed a new, threatening and malicious fiction, and a blatant attempt to weaken and destroy the image and self-esteem of the world champion. According to the *PDG* of August 5, 1988, it emerged that this sinister tale had been started by a Mexican TV network in July and was picked up by other western newspapers. Oko Kwatekwei subsequently confirmed that a Mexico City TV network had orchestrated it (Fernandez, *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990). Why would a Mexican TV network attempt to stigmatise him with accusations of having AIDS? To many people, HIV or AIDS commonly implies death caused by an 'immoral' life led in sexual promiscuity and/or illicit drug abuse and addiction. Was the scandalmonger slyly trying to avenge Martinez after Azumah Nelson had demonstrated his fistic supremacy over him? Was the scandal fabricated to try to demoralise and disturb or defocus him psychologically and emotionally and quicken a defeat of him in a possible rematch? Maybe the scandalmonger and the allies of the scandalmonger sought all of the above.

In the *PDG* of August 5, 1988, Nana Fitz, a Ghanaian fan and friend of the champion, called it 'nonsense' and false. This ardent boxing fan observed that AIDS was fast becoming a 'weapon' used against African boxers and 'heroes' in top boxing. He cited the case of Michael Olajide, a Nigerian contender to the world middleweight

title, who was accused of having the deadly disease. He disclosed that for many of those who were not aware Azumah Nelson was not the first Ghanaian boxer to be subjected to such character assassination and stigmatisation. 'It had also happened to Ghana's middleweight champion, Umaru Sanda, who had been subjected to an AIDS test nine hours before his recent Commonwealth title fight against Nigel Benn of Britain'. Small wonder that 'he was knocked out in the first round. He had been beaten psychologically before the fight'.

Despite the hullabaloo, the champion retained his equanimity, at least outwardly, and trained. To avoid being misconstrued and/or misrepresented, he made no public pronouncements about the story. The general accord among his fandom was a rejection of the allegation as a spectre of media and boxing 'mafia' balderdash intended to wreck his respectable image in and outside the ring. Meanwhile, a story titled 'Nelson OK' in the London *Daily Mirror* of July dismissed the story as 'plain unadulterated rubbish' and mentioned Don King Promotions' Al Braverman's disclosure of the imminence of an Azumah–McGuigan engagement.

It seemed to some sources that negotiations for a multi-million Azumah versus McGuigan engagement had compelled some Mexican elements who inordinately craved an Azumah–Martinez rematch to start the smear campaign because he was not gravitating to Martinez for a fight. The much talked-about match between him and the Irish boxer did not manifest because their handlers could not produce a meaningful and solid deal. Nevertheless, it was mandatory once again for him to defend his title.

The spurious HIV rumour died as swiftly as it had emerged. Was he psychologically affected? According to Bernard Fernandez, the champion was 'only human' and hence was affected by the controversy, however brief its duration (Fernandez, *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990). As Al Braverman revealed in the *Daily Press* of May 18, 1990, 'He (Azumah Nelson) knew he wasn't sick, but he was sick at heart, [because of the lie]'. He added: 'There's a million dirty tricks in this business, but this one had to be the dirtiest ever'. Furthermore, he believed that 'a couple of jealous guys' in Mexico who also wanted to steal Julio César Chávez from Don King had engineered the rumour to discredit the promoter. Rebuking the media that spread the story, he iterated: 'It was the epitome of irresponsible journalism'. He disclosed that 'Somebody wanted to hurt Don [King] by hurting one of his fighters, and I guess they figured Azumah was an easy target' (Fernandez, *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990). Infuriated by this unjust attack on innocence, he lamented that

[A]nyone who knows Azumah could have told you it was a lie. He doesn't do drugs, he's straight as an arrow, he's a good family man who doesn't fool around. But I guess people are going to believe anything that's printed, even if it's on toilet paper. (Fernandez, *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990)



Incidentally, since HIV can be transmitted through cuts, past and would-be opponents became concerned about their health status and safety. Series of medical tests were conducted on the champion, on three continents, in the wake of the rumour (Fernandez, *Daily Press*, May 18, 1990), and all gave him a clean bill of health. The WBC authoritatively deemed him 'clean', did not de-title him, and did not ban him from fighting despite what sceptics thought. His profession was not ruined. Any fear that some of his fans might have had that he would not be permitted to box again and he would be broken if the rumours had turned out to be true was allayed.

Still the champ: Will he stride into the lightweight division?

Consequently, he and his handlers brought a fight to Accra on December 10, 1988 to appease his Ghanaian fans after enduring turbulent months of the HIV/AIDS saga. He brilliantly defended his title by knocking out the Brazilian challenger Sidnei Dal Rovere in round three in a match refereed by Rudy Ortega and judged by Rolando Barrovecchio and Kamel Youssef. It was a 'Christmas gift' to Ghanaians. Subsequently, the Ghanaian side accepted the challenge from Mexico's hero, Mario Martinez. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, he recalled telling his handlers: 'Listen ... Kaa worry (Do not worry) I am gonna fight Martinez'. He assured them, in Ga, that: 'Mayi le. Martinez e brag o too much' (literally, 'I will beat him. Martinez brags too much'). The WBC endorsed February 25, 1989 for the rematch. He furiously resolved to beat Martinez to settle the controversy about who between them was the best in their division.

Many optimistic Mexican fans thronged to the ringside in the Hilton Hotel in Las Vegas for the fight. He recounted that he had not wanted to hurt the 'guy', but he had to

beat him well, ... he bragged ... I was very upset because of the desire of some people in his country to shame my image. I was determined to teach him and his fans 'a lesson' in boxing.

Rounds one to about ten were hard-fought. The fighters developed hematomas (blood blisters) in their punch-for-punch intercourse. By the start of round twelve, it was clear that the rapid pace of the fight had exhausted both men. Martinez wore a face contorted by abrasions and contusions. Finally, the fight, refereed by Carlos Padilla and judged by Miguel Donate, Dave Moretti and Ladislao Sanchez, ended with a TKO. It was a hard-won victory for Azumah Nelson. He recounted: 'That man [Martinez] surely could take punches. He also had hard punches. He was strong, full of power, but I managed to take the "petrol" out of his tank'. The better fighter had

emerged. The victory entered another section to his résumé – ‘Azumah Nelson is the best in the “who’s who category” in his division’.

The champion’s handlers accepted a challenge from the Briton Jim ‘the Pride of London’ McDonnell to fight on the challenger’s home turf. The champion and his handlers disregarded a potential home crowd advantage to the challenger and decided to travel to England in search of a win and handsome financial reward. Azumah Nelson, carrying the appellation ‘the Lion of Africa’, was not new to globetrotting and winning. He had won his first title by travelling. Later, in 1992, he testified in a pre-fight interview before fighting Jeff Fenech that the crowd never bothered him. ‘I am going to the ring with the guy. The fans do not go there’, revealed his state of mind when he fought. He depended on this conviction, a key psychological weapon, for his fights against opponents in their backyards. Naturally, he relied on it against McDonnell on November 2, 1989.

Sportsbeat (October 3–9, 1989) reported that his camp was expected to receive about £500 000, while McDonnell was to take about £100 000 for the night’s work at the Albert Hall in Kensington, London (*Sp*, September 16, 1989, 16). He was rather sceptical about the general reception that awaited him in England because of the hostility his camp had experienced from sections of the English fans when he fought Pat Cowdell in Birmingham. He narrated: ‘I however had to go because my handlers had already agreed and accepted the venue. I however was determined to not leave the title there in London’ (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). Moreover, he sought to consolidate his position as the best in his division, promote his image in European boxing rings, and reap the financial package that came with the arrangement.

When Barry Hearn, McDonnell’s promoter, announced the fight to the English public and press on September 12, 1989, which was McDonnell’s birthday (*Sp*, September 16, 1989, 16), many accepted it as the cracker fight for 1989. McDonnell disclosed to the press and fans that ‘I am the underdog like in the fight with McGuigan but watch out for another upset’ (*GT*, September 26, 1989, 7). British sports scribes and boxing fans anticipated a victory for the hero they were still celebrating for ‘poleaxing’ the Irish idol McGuigan and truncating his hopes of fighting Champ and his boxing career with a TKO in round four on May 31, 1989. The Irishman testified that ‘When a McDonnell looping hook rips you open, you ain’t have no time to last’ (*Africa Sports*, October 2–9, 1989, 3).

Jim McDonnell was an ‘unknown’ super-featherweight boxer, rated 11th by the WBC. His main fight of substance, before defeating McGuigan, was against South African-born Brian Mitchel, the WBA super-featherweight champion. Was McDonnell proficient enough to match the cat-like punches and lethal seriousness of Azumah Nelson, which had inflicted a round-one KO on Pat Cowdell, and avenge



Cowdell and his British fans? Would he, 'the Pride of London', succeed in avoiding the 'boxing paws' of 'the Lion of Africa' and tame him? In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, Champ explained that he had resolved to teach the young Briton 'a lesson' and prove to English and world spectators that his victory over Cowdell had not been a fluke. Thus, he trained intensively, mainly in his ultra-modern gymnasium at his residence in Accra, and at Accra Sports Stadium.

His international trainer, the celebrated Spanish coach José 'Buffalo' Martinez, who also helped Julio César Chávez with training and victories, arrived in Accra in September to help him prepare. He had provided technical assistance to the champion for more than five years and had aided him in his recent victories over Del Rovere and Mario Martinez. The Spaniard predicted that 'the British ... would be ... beaten in the first four rounds ... to admit that he has been in a fight' (*GS*, September 26–October 2, 1989, 2). He added: '[H]e is the sensation of the British rings at the moment but he [apart from his bragging] respects Azumah Nelson and that is a good advantage' (*GT*, September 26, 1989, 7). Meanwhile, McDonnell admitted: '... I am prepared to go through hell to take the title from him [Azumah Nelson]'. He added: 'I wasn't exactly a big favourite before the McGuigan fight either. Nelson has been a brilliant champion ... But I am going to provide another major upset' (O'Gara, *Sporting Events*, October 2–9, 1989, 3).

Had he found the Achilles heel of the champion? If so, was the champion going to expose it? Many Ghanaian fans, both at home and abroad, and other admirers of the champion, however, kept faith and supported him. For example, Sir Ishola Akay of All Stars Boxing Club⁴ freely offered his gym in London to the champion to train, declaring: 'I am prepared to mobilise a whole lot of support for Azumah to enhance his chances of success' (*Sportsbeat*, October 3–9, 1989, 4). Incidentally, some sports connoisseurs in England were outwardly sceptical about McDonnell's chances. Mickey Carney, an esteemed boxing trainer, and Ron Boddy, a known boxing analyst in London, deemed him no match for the title holder. Even a special article titled 'Dazzling Azumah could be Africa's Greatest', carried by *Boxing News*, an international boxing magazine popular in the UK, predicted a win for the champion and his consequent entry into the expanding group of champions who had held three world titles. It described Azumah Nelson as 'a supreme craftsman who can dazzle his opponents with ... speed, skill and ... the punch to take them out with one shot' (as quoted in *GS*, October 10–16, 1989, 4). Meanwhile, news circulated that Champ would have a build-up match in West Germany, in December (*Super Sports*, October 15, 1989, 1), against an anonymous contender after McDonnell. The fight was to enhance his image in Europe and prepare him to compete for a lightweight title. The prestigious lightweight title had become vacant because of Julio César Chávez's (the previous holder's) ambitious advancement towards the junior (light) welterweight

division. Azumah Nelson, who would have wanted to fight Chávez, but not for the latter's advancement, envisioned a possible engagement with lightweight boxer Pernell 'Sweet Pea' Whitaker. A fight between him and 'Sweet Pea' for the IBF lightweight title, which the latter had snatched from Greg Haugen on February 28, 1989, seemed possible. Both boxers wanted to fight each other, and, so, speculation abounded that they might clash in February or March 1990. This, however, did not occur.

Boxing pundits generally believed that a contest between them would be particularly challenging for both proud boxers. Whitaker was very protective of his position as champion. 1989 was a good boxing year for him. This is because on August 20 of that year he impressively managed to clinch the WBC lightweight title which he added to the IBF one that he already had. Confident that he would beat McDonnell, Azumah Nelson also psyched himself for an eventual clash with Whitaker. Could he stand against the fury of Whitaker, a reputed protective, fast and hard-styled southpaw boxer? Could Whitaker's southpaw stance, like Lupe Suarez's, make him a 'hard nut to crack'? The answer to these questions resided in a future clash that occurred between the two. I shall soon discuss this clash.

The enthusiasm of British fans in England, which had waned considerably following the thrashing of McGuigan, surged for the approaching Azumah Nelson–Jim McDonnell contest (*Super Sports*, October 15, 1989, 1). The zeal of Ghanaian fans was also high. Before he departed for England, the champion and Nana Yaw Konadu, who was also preparing for a major international engagement, trained at the Sports Hall of the Accra Sports Stadium. Employing psychology and drama, he used his training and interviews as symbolic acts to boost the confidence of onlooking fans and admirers. He and Konadu sparred different partners, launched powerful punches on punching bags and flexed the rippling muscles of their bodies which glittered with sweat (*GS*, October 10–16, 1989, 4). He gave confident interviews to encourage his fans. Sustaining the tradition of bragging, which Muhammad Ali, the 'Louisville Lip', had perfected in boxing, he also 'gave' them his 'Ga-Mashie Lip'. For example, in his Ali-like swift and witty remarks, he told sports scribes in Accra in October: 'I have trained for only three rounds [for McDonnell], a KO can even come early ... [M]y fans at home want it fast and early!' (*GS*, October 10–16, 1989, 4). Asked if he was not being complacent, he responded: 'I am not underrating McDonnell but he will go early. I regard him as tougher than Barry McGuigan whom he stopped recently but McDonnell can't stand my bomb'. *Graphic Sport* reported that he explained that he wanted to end the fight prematurely because: 'I want ... to prove a point that I've not lost my punching power as some Britons think. They should ask McDonnell how he felt in the ring with me when it's all over' (*GS*, October 10–16, 1989, 4). Rated by the WBA and WBC as the top contender for the lightweight titles, he considered the imminent fight as an easy payday and one of his highest, if not *the* highest, financial



rewards. He also deemed it a crucial preparation for his quest for the IBF, if not the WBC, lightweight title, which he craved.

Inexorably, he and McDonnell clashed in the ring at the packed-to-the-rafters Royal Albert Hall on the night of November 5. Were his predictions going to be fulfilled or would McDonnell cause an upset? In the end, he proved that McDonnell, like Pat Cowdell, had a soft chin. The challenger suffered some knockdowns from the *enfant terrible* from Ghana before referee Joe Cortez stopped the fight in round twelve.

Azumah Nelson recalled in a personal interview on October 5, 2009 that even though he had wanted to get rid of McDonnell early, he 'proved strong and stubborn'. The challenger survived the third round. The champion's prediction had failed to happen. What next? McDonnell was putting up a good show in round five, when suddenly the question: 'What happened?' resonated among parts of the crowd. A huge left hook caught the challenger and he went down. That was what had happened! The challenger beat the referee's count. The fight continued strongly. The final stanza of that terrific fight arrived! Jim McDonnell crumpled through the ropes after he was caught, early, by some huge winging punches. Again, he beat the count, but was now easy prey. A devastating right from Champ in round twelve finally finished the 'job' of defending his title. The fight was judged by Franz Marti, Tom Kaczmarek and Tony Castellano. McDonnell's performance dwindled after this defeat. He lost to Kenny Vice and Peter Feher before retiring in 1998, committing himself to training budding boxers in England.⁵

Azumah Nelson decided to challenge Whitaker in the lightweight division in 1990, which was the WBC-designated year for apartheid to end in South Africa (PDG, May 11, 1990, 15). Was he capable of abdicating his reign as *Rex* of the featherweights and triumphantly starting a new one as a lightweight champion?

A wrong move? Pernell Whitaker beats Azumah Nelson, 1990

If 1990 was, politically, an important year for the WBC, it was professionally significant for Azumah Nelson. On May 19, 1990, he openly tried to join the exclusive group of champions who had held world titles in three divisions by challenging Whitaker, another legendary WBC champion.⁶ Ghanaian fans were ambivalent about his decision. Some thought that another world title would improve his international boxing image and reputation. Others opined that the move up was hastily dangerous. Stubbornly determined, as always, he maintained his conviction to contest Whitaker for the IBF cum WBC lightweight titles. Brian Robertson reported on May 10, 1990 in the *Statesman* that his handlers had signed the contract for what the *KO Magazine* described as the 'battle between two of the top pound-for-pound boxers'.⁷

Co-promoted by Don King Promotions Inc. and Dan Duva's Main Events company, the fight was scheduled for the Caesars Palace Sports Pavilion in Las Vegas (Robertson, *Statesman*, May 10, 1990, 20). As stated in the *PDG* on May 3, 1990, a cable message from José Sulaiman and Don King to Ringcraft and Seth Asah assured the boxer that he would keep his super-featherweight title in case he failed to win. This news boosted his confidence for the contest; the information also calmed down some of his anxious fans who feared that he would forfeit his title if he lost to Whitaker in a lightweight title fight. Seth Asah additionally indicated, however, that a victory for him would mean that he had seven days to decide which of the two titles to keep, according to WBC directives. In contrast to the persistent rumour that he had been stripped of his super-featherweight title because he was moving to another division, this explanation from Asah further clarified to worried fans that he still had his title and would keep it even if Whitaker defeated him (*PDG*, May 3, 1990, 15).

Whitaker's international acclaim as a top pound-for-pound fighter was garnered by his outstanding defensive skills. He had a 'strange' style of boxing, amorphously expansive and difficult to define.⁸ Bert Randolph Sugar deemed it 'pure poetry in motion, or more correctly, pure poetry in many motions' (Sugar 2006, 164). The 'dancing', 'contorting', and 'disappearing' acts he exuded during fights finely blended sportsmanship and showmanship to bemuse contenders and entertain spectators. Was his boxing a form of boxing break dancing? Was the boxing of this boxer, who once said: 'I don't care who I'm fighting. I don't care if it's God. If I don't want God to hit me, He's not going to hit me' (Sugar 2006, 163), a now-you-see-him-now-you-don't style? It was unique. One minute his lanky frame would be in front of his opponent. In a split second, he would be behind, tapping the rear of the opposition. He could throw his arm and simultaneously withhold a punch if his opponent flinched. But if the opponent did not, he might let the punch hit. He could dip down low in a feline crouch and quickly step around an opponent to hit him on his back. He could dexterously use his gloves to pull down an opponent's trunks as he did to Roger Mayweather in their North American Boxing Federation (NABF) lightweight encounter in 1987. Despite these qualities, his trainer Lou Duva did not expect the fight to be a cakewalk. Duva confessed to Brian Robertson of the *Statesman* that: 'I don't underestimate Nelson. He's a very tough fighter ... but Pernell has prepared well and I expect him to win a hard-fought unanimous decision' (May 10, 1990, 20). Many odds-makers agreed with Duva and made Whitaker a 4-1 favourite over Nelson (May 10, 1990, 20). In contrast, Al Braverman warned that: 'The odds-makers are making a big mistake. Azumah has been training hard for this fight and the jump in weight will only make him stronger' (Robertson, *Statesman*, May 10, 1990, 20). Azumah Nelson was going to compete against Whitaker as an underdog. According Joe Aggrey of the *PDG*, pundits opined that it was 'a make or



break effort' for him to gain super stardom, a big purse of about US\$500 000 and big money fights ahead (*PDG*, May 18, 1990, 15). The contest was not exactly the 'King Solomon's Mines' that the Ghanaian had been looking for; nevertheless, he deemed it a catapult to bigger millions-rewarding 'El Dorado' fights.

Just a day before the fight, he reiterated to the sports scribes in the 'gambling city' that although some writers considered him an 'aged' 31-year-old challenger, he would steamroll the 26-year-old Whitaker. He asserted: "The men I really want are Julio César Chávez [the WBC super-lightweight (light-welterweight) champion] and Mark Breland, the WBC welterweight champion' (Aggrey, *PDG*, May 18, 1990, 15.)

Some analysts perceived the wide age disparity as a disadvantage, yet they did not underestimate Champ's rich experience and big punch. Interestingly, they all seemed to agree that he could only win by a KO. Trainer José 'Buffalo' Martinez disclosed that his side had developed a strategy to surmount all the advantages of the champion: youth, bigger body, longer reach and speed. Martinez put his trainee on a Spartan-like training regimen. He banned him from the interfering palatial environment of the Caesar's Palace where, originally, the challenger had planned to stay before the fight. Martinez chose a smaller hotel, with fewer distractions, for them to stay and train for the challenger's most important bout. Whitaker, who eventually became a boxing hall of fame inductee⁹ and, in a different fight against Andrei Pestriayev, tested positive for using cocaine, handed Azumah Nelson his second loss since turning professional. Before the fight, Whitaker and Azumah Nelson had the showbiz-inspired pre-match face-to-face verbal altercation at a press conference on May 17 at the Caesar's Palace. In an article titled 'I'll Walk through Whitaker's Punches – Azumah' (*PDG*, May 19, 1990, 1) Joe Aggrey reported how the poised challenger, in the company of Carl King, declared:

I am going to walk right through his (Whitaker's) punches ... and when he tastes ... mine, he will try to hide. But ... he ... can't hide.

He added:

When I was already a world champion, Pernell was just coming out of boxing school, an Olympic amateur titlist. Now I'm a professor of boxing and I'm going to take this young man through a few lessons on Saturday.¹⁰

Notably, this audacious declaration appears to be the beginning of his use of 'professor' as a title and an alias. It gained popularity and international currency as his main sobriquet when he clashed with Jeff Fenech later. Strikingly, Whitaker the 'student' conversely taught the 'professor', who had taught many boxers lessons in the ring by beating them, 'a lesson'. Prior to this epic fight, which, following a promise made to Ghanaians by the Ghana Ministry of Information, was transmitted live on the GBC

TV network, at 2:00 am GMT on Sunday, May 20, the older challenger retorted: 'Old age is a state of mind and right now, I feel stronger than ever before and Pernell will testify to this on Saturday night' (Aggrey, *PDG*, May 19, 1990, 1). Behind this facade of poise lurked a secret issue that was weighing him down psychologically and pushing him close to a nervous breakdown. He could not concentrate his full attention on his fight with Whitaker. What was the disconcerting issue? His wife Beatrice was critically ill and the information that reached him described her condition as near fatal. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, he recounted:

I could not think properly ... I thought of ... going back to Ghana to see her. I decided to ... fight and be professional. I had strong hope in God and believed that she will be well. It was not easy, but I stay[ed] in the USA to finish with what I went there to do.

Backing his fighter, Don King told the media 'The score is already 1-0 in our favour (a reference to Julio César Chávez's recent defeat of Meldrick Taylor). On Saturday, we'll surely make it 2-0' (quoted by Joe Aggrey in the *PDG* on May 19, 1990, 15, 1). In an effort to brow-beat Whitaker's camp and its manager Dan Duva, the son of Lou Duva, King, it is alleged, introduced Oko Kwatekwei as the challenger's 'juju'¹¹ man who would support him with spiritual powers and magically cast a spell on Whitaker. This apparently was intended to remind Dan Duva about what had happened some years previously when Don King managed Livingstone Bramble to demolish Ray 'Boom Boom' Mancini, alias Raymond Michael Mancini. In that encounter King and Bramble, it was reported, had somebody dressed in the 'apparel' of a 'juju man'. Joe Aggrey explained that this was intended to send the notion to the superstitious that the supposed juju man was backing Bramble with benevolent magical powers to be victorious. If Whitaker was superstitious and perturbed by King's allusions to juju and magic's relationship with the victory of Bramble, he did not readily show it. Rather, he quipped: '[T]he sport belongs to the young and the old champ will realise ... he's well past his peak and that he has made a bad mistake challenging me for my title'. Before the fight, the government of Ghana and the GBA and other famous stakeholders and renowned businesspersons like Mr Sam Akuamoah Toyota, the Managing Director of Ansabaks Enterprise Limited and a close associate of Azumah Nelson, and Mr Kweku Aidoo, who once managed Nana Yaw Konadu, sent messages of good wishes and support to the Ghanaian boxer. Even Nii Quaye Mensah, the Vice Chairman of the GBA, was at the ringside. According to the *PDG* of May 19, Amarkai Amarteifio instructed him to: '... demolish this young man ... and let the "Sweet Pea" swallow a bitter pill'. The GBA stated that 'As Azumah mounts the ring to defend the flag of Ghana, Ghanaians will pray that he brings honour to the nation once again'. The message, signed by a top official



of the GBA, Mr John Allotei (Allotey) Cofie, continued: 'we do not doubt your capabilities to snatch the title from the American as you did in 1984 in faraway San Juan, Puerto Rico, against the once fearful Wilfredo Gomez'. Ringcraft made appeals in the print media to solicit national support, and assured fans that the challenger, the first African to attempt to win three different titles, would demolish Whitaker. Yet, at the end of twelve rounds of boxing, refereed by Mills Lane and judged by Harry Gibbs (OBE), Sid Nathan and Dalby Shirley, the 'Sweet Pea' had won by a unanimous decision, even though points were deducted from him in the last round for a foul. He retained his IBF and WBC lightweight titles.¹²

Right from the beginning Whitaker's jabs controlled the fight. His mercurial body movement protected him from the challenger's grenade punches. The challenger 'swallowed' many on-the-target punches and jabs from Whitaker. Whitaker slipped several thunderous hooks from the *enfant terrible* from Ghana with his occasional squat-crouch positions. These awkward positions killed the challenger's old ferocious intensity and punching fire. But why were the challenger's punches and hooks not landing well?

Wily Whitaker found a way to muddle his straight punches. For example, in round eleven he held the challenger,

tightly like a lover, afraid to let go of a wayward boy-friend who was likely to slip out of her life any minute. To free himself from the embrace, [which had made it difficult for the challenger to punch Whitaker] Azumah Nelson [in an attempt to create space] virtually had to wheel Whitaker down. (PDG, May 21, 1990, 1, 15)

Using his sneaky style, he once or twice grabbed the challenger's thigh and nearly forced him to fall down. He also punched below the belt, which attracted a warning from the referee in round two. Overall, he mesmerised the challenger with his ineluctable and ambiguous boxing style. Despite this, the challenger later attributed his loss to some personal problems, including a hand injury sustained during training three weeks earlier (GT, March 2, 1992, 1, 3). He claimed that at one juncture in the fight he could not throw his injured left, and his right also started to ache. He added in a post-fight interview: 'I don't want to give any excuses for losing to a great champion. But that's the truth and that is why my trainer [José 'Buffalo' Martinez] is so mad with me out there. He advised me to get the fight postponed but I didn't listen' (Aggrey, PDG, May 21, 1990, 1). Consequently, 'We finished the fight on points and ... he won the fight and I know he won the fight, because I don't do anything' (Azumah Nelson interview, *Zoom Zoom – The Professor* 2010).

Was his decision to join the lightweights misguided? Conceivably, he had made a mistake. His fans were disappointed, but not devastated, because he was still

the super-featherweight title holder. Nevertheless, he explained his failure to Joe Aggrey of the *PDG* on May 21 with a soothing statement laced with honesty and philosophical truism:

I'm not looking for excuses. Once a while things don't go well for even the greatest boxers. It happened to even Muhammad Ali. The important thing is the ability to put such a misfortune behind you and come back winning again. For me, that is the mark of a great champion. (*PDG*, May 21, 1990, 1)

In the same article by Joe Aggrey, Whitaker disclosed that:

He brought out the best in me since my Olympic gold medal-winning performance. When Azumah was world champion, I was still an amateur. He called me a junior high school kid but after this match with 'the professor' I believe I can call myself a senior high school boy now. ... I am still learning and this fight with a champion like Azumah has taught me a few more lessons. (*PDG*, May 21, 1990, 1)

He added that 'Azumah Nelson was a great fighter ... who brought the best out of me and out of himself'.¹³ For successfully defeating Azumah Nelson, the WBC honoured Whitaker as the 'Boxer of the Month (May)' (*PDG*, May 28, 1990, 15).

Azumah Nelson returns to rule the super-featherweights, 1990

Azumah Nelson realised his blunder and reverted to his familiar super-featherweight territory to regain his winning streak. He rekindled his boxing radiance there. The fact that the lower divisions were his most comfortable niche was known even to his trainer 'Buffalo' Martinez before he attempted to become a lightweight. In fact, Sam Doku reported that a few weeks before he fought McDonnell, his experienced trainer, who could discern a good boxer from a bad one and the great from the not so great, described him as the 'greatest fighter' of all time in the lower division (*Sports Star*, October 11–17, 1989, 1). Martinez was an accomplished coach. He aided the great boxer Julio César Chávez, alias JC Superstar, to build an enviable fighting record. Chávez is credited as having immaculately revived the near-forgotten art of in-fighting, which left opponents exhausted any time he applied it. His stupendous record at the time of the Azumah Nelson-Pernell Whitaker fight showed sixty-nine fights without defeat. He won a super-featherweight title, which he relinquished when he won the WBC lightweight title and unseated Roger Mayweather for the WBA lightweight title.

Before the advent of Azumah Nelson and Chávez, Roberto Duran, who once fought as a lightweight, was considered the best fighter in the lower division.



However, as at 1990, Azumah Nelson had become the greatest in the lower division for many connoisseurs. In the ring, as Doku noted, he manifested a farrago of Ruben Olivares' poleaxing method. He possessed the granite-like jaw of Carlos Monzon, projected the cast-like and spear-like punches of D.K. Poison in his heyday, and unleashed the intimidating aggression of Joe Frazier. Even though he was not fast and loquacious like Muhammad Ali, he possessed a cute physique and boyish looks as well as a seraphic smile, which usually gave his opponents a false sense of hope and frequently misled them into trouble. It was only in the ring, after he had worn his visage of seriousness and started his business of 'no mercy' with them that most opponents became fully aware that they were not up against a kind seraph of a boy, but a serious, 'mean' boxing genius of a man. This was the person who 'Buffalo' Martinez, a fabled coach of the twentieth century, described as the greatest.

After the encounter with Whitaker, Azumah Nelson quickly returned to support his ailing wife to recovery (*PDG*, May 26, 1990, 15). Meanwhile rumour about her 'death' in the intensive care unit of the Korle Bu Teaching Hospital in Accra circulated in Ghana. To kill the rumour, the hospital authorities issued a press statement, which, according to the *PDG* of May 22, described as untrue the news that Madam Beatrice Tandoh, the wife of the national hero, was dead (*PDG*, May 22, 1990, 15). She was convalescing under the watchful eyes of her husband. His managers, John Kermah and Oko Kwatekwei, and the WBC, and the camp of Juan La Porte meanwhile agreed in the USA for a mandatory defence fight for him (*PDG*, May 26, 1990, 15). Although the challenge came at a trying time in his life as a husband, he professionally accepted the obligatory fight against La Porte, the former featherweight champion. He viewed it as a chance to placate his fans for losing to Whitaker and to maintain his position at the top of the super-featherweight division which, according to the latest WBC rankings, had Jeff Fenech and Juan La Porte as the top two contenders (*PDG*, May 28, 1990, 15).

He trained hard and fought La Porte¹⁴ on October 13, 1990 at the Entertainment Centre in Sydney, New South Wales, Australia in a fight of twelve rounds refereed by Malcolm Bulner. The judges, Eddie Francis, Gus Mercurio and Herbert Minn, unanimously declared him the winner. He could not stop La Porte, yet his victory, at that difficult period in his personal life, showed that he was a determined force to be reckoned with. He demonstrated great flair in the fight. Truly, if Muhammad Ali contributed largely in bringing exuberance and ring originality into boxing, then Azumah Nelson helped to sustain that brilliance and legacy with his splendid footwork in the super-featherweight division. Maintaining supremacy in the division, he incontrovertibly became the number one on the list of Who's Who of the great international featherweights of the time. Marcos Villasana and Mario Martinez (who were both defeated twice), and Danilo Cabrera and Lupe Suarez are just a

couple of the renowned fighters who succumbed to Azumah Nelson, who was now campaigning in the super-featherweight category.

He fought twice in 1991. He engaged Daniel Mustapha (Daniyal Mustapha Ennin) in a non-title but financially rewarding warm-up fight on March 16 in coach Martinez's faraway Spain. It was organised to entertain Spanish fans and build him up for an envisaged bout with the fierce Jeff Fenech from Down Under, who had disclosed in 1988 that Azumah Nelson was his main target (*GS*, January 18, 1988, 4). Mustapha suffered a round four KO at the Pabellón Príncipe Felipe, in Zaragoza, Aragón, Spain. Incidentally, the envisaged fight with Fenech, Australia's national sports treasure, attracted tremendous attention from the world of professional boxing. Although long overdue, it promised to be 'a fight of the ages', involving the champion and a challenger who was a former super-bantamweight and featherweight champion.¹⁵ It was Fenech's debut in the USA and he considered it vital for his career development and wider recognition.

Unlike the globetrotting and 'road warrior' champion, Fenech, whose tale of the tape was 25-0, had boxed only once outside his country. Confidently, Bill Mordey, one of Australia's famous promoters, averred that: 'After Friday night, America would know who we are'. He and Australians imagined Fenech clinching a title in a fourth weight class¹⁶ and acquiring stronger recognition and box-office influence. Over 300 flag-waving and banner-carrying Aussies assembled at the fight venue at the Mirage Hotel and Casino, in Las Vegas, to cheer Fenech, their hero. But did Fenech invite a wrong date, that is, Azumah Nelson, to his maiden 'out-dooring' ceremony in the USA? Refereed by Joe Cortez, the fight ended with no winner. This exasperated the challenger. How did the fight go?

Ripping jabs and hooks from both fighters dominated the first three rounds. The champion largely fought with his back to the ropes while the challenger dug in and fired away without making clean landings in the next three rounds. 'I love the ropes', he said afterwards.¹⁷ He also did a lot of circling and jabbing while Fenech chased him in round six. It wore him down. Noting that he was tired in round ten, his corner-men 'stole' some important rest for him by applying the old 'search-for-the-misplaced-mouth guard' trick in boxing. The antic delayed the resumption of the following round. He got some rest.

Untraditional of him, he reverted to the use of the ropes in the corners. Why? In an article titled, 'Azumah, the Modern Hero', Frank Mensah explained that Fenech was a good boxer 'with abundant stamina' and 'punched faster than any boxer in the world' (*GS*, March 24-30, 1992, 3), so he developed that tactic to neutralise his opponent's fighting verve. He later explained that strategy to a group of orphans and their teachers in Accra: '... Therefore, when fighting such a boxer [Fenech], ["with abundant stamina" and fast punches] one has to devise a strategy to counteract that



prowess, and [so] anytime we went into the corner, it was to wear him down' (*GS*, March 24–30, 1992, 3).

During the final twenty seconds in the final round, Fenech's avalanche of punches nearly crumpled the tired champion to his knees. Famous boxing analyst, Ferdie 'Fight Doctor' Pacheco,¹⁸ commentating for American TV, summed up the wild and sensational exchanges during the final twenty seconds best: 'Azumah is fighting for memory – but it is now history!'¹⁹

Did Azumah Nelson win? No. Was he able to defend the title? Yes, but it was a mightily close one! It is worth noting that his wife died in the middle of his preparatory exercises to fight Fenech and, over the years, he has admitted that that incident troubled him psychologically and made him lose focus. Moreover, after the fight he disclosed that among other difficulties, like an aching elbow, he had suffered a bout with malaria up until just ten days before the fight, and that had deprived him of vigour and endurance in the match. By the scores of 115–113, 116–112, and 114–114, the judges, Jerry Roth, Dave Moretti and Miguel Donate, gave the judgement of a draw. The Aussies thunderously booed the verdict. Fenech, who verbally lamented his displeasure and threw his arms in the air to symbolise his lack of trust in the verdict of the judges,²⁰ was in tears when Ferdie Pacheco interviewed him. The verdict dashed his dream of becoming a four-division champion. To console both boxers, Don King declared that since neither had lost there should be a return match.

Back in his cabin in Las Vegas, Fenech's hematomas ached but the pain from the bruises did not surpass that which the thought about the draw gave him psychologically and emotionally. Hence, he lamented: 'What more do they [judges] want me to do?' He believed that some 'underhandedness' had taken place among the judges. However, he indicated in post-fight interviews that even though he was returning to Australia without the title he was prepared to fight Azumah Nelson again because he earnestly desired to get Azumah Nelson's stardom.

Most Aussies and some boxing observers, including Ferdie Pacheco, believed that Fenech should have won. Don King, it was reported, believed that Fenech had been in the lead in the fight in Las Vegas (*Gossip*, March 4–10, 1992, 1, 3). The verdict, however, remained unchanged.

While Azumah Nelson nursed his body and injured elbow in the months that followed the Las Vegas episode, Fenech repeatedly lamented the 'controversial' verdict on Australian TV and implied that there had been a 'fixing'. Some of the media applauded Fenech as a worthy all-time great; meanwhile, some suggested retirement for Azumah Nelson. Unhappy with claims of chicanery and the prescription of retirement, the Ghanaian boxer resolved to discipline Fenech in a rematch. His handlers formally signed the contract for the fight, which reportedly promised him about one million dollars. The bout was set for March 1, 1992.

A father and son affair: Azumah Nelson defeats Jeff Fenech, 1992

An aspect of the deal was bewildering. He agreed that the rematch should occur in Melbourne, Fenech's neighbourhood in Australia. Naturally, many Ghanaian fans had their hearts in their mouths about the venue. Why did he agree to a defence fight in his avowed adversary's backyard? The seduction of the prize money or, as rumour had it, was he going there to deliberately lose to substantiate a behind-the-scenes arrangement between the bosses of the two boxers? Consequently, Samuel Kissiedu reported in the *GS* of March 3–9, 1992 that 'genuine concern was expressed in hundreds of letters' that inundated *GS* offices in Ghana, 'warning Azumah not to dare fight in Australia' but he remained resolute. So, what was his game plan? He recounted in a personal interview on October 5, 2009 that:

I wanted the world to know that I was the best ... that Fenech could not beat me. [T]he first time I had emotional problems and could hardly concentrate. My elbow was sore and could not hit ... effectively but ... I managed ... the full twelve rounds. By the time we agreed to fight again, I was okay ... I was ready.

So,

I wanted to beat him ... in his own country ... to avoid any arguments. I wanted to ... judge. You know I was carrying my own judges – my fist and punches – to Melbourne ... to KO him to cut short any twelve rounds lap, which could possibly make another hotly [debated and] disputed decision.

According to him, even the Head of State, J.J. Rawlings, asked him whether he was sure about his decision. He replied that he wanted to go, not because of any money involved, but to KO Fenech to prove his greatness.²¹ The politician encouraged him to go and defend the title.

He trained in Spain. He cancelled all merriments for his Christmas holidays of 1991 (*Gossip*, March 4–10, 1992, 1). In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, he explained: 'My coach and my managers suggested that I should go to Spain, because I liked it there when I fought Mustapha, to prepare'. He underwent a surgical procedure there on January 7 to drain an accumulated pool of fluid in the joint of his elbow, which had caused him much pain in his first fight with Fenech. Spain was therapeutic and tactically good for him. It shielded him from extraneous distractions in Ghana and familiar images that could remind him about the loss of his wife. It enabled him to physically recuperate well and fully focus on his training and the task ahead.

Prior to the fight, the challenger declared: 'The only way they're going to take [Nelson] home to Ghana is in a body bag' (Roberts and Skutt 2006, 377). Determined



to erase the ghosts of the match in Las Vegas, the champion retorted: 'Tell Fenech he is playing with fire, and it will burn him' (Tom Duffy, *Fight Beat*, n.d.). So, how did the fight turn out?

He and his small entourage arrived at the Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne and had a modest reception from his fans. He told Australian sports scribes and media:

I want to prove ... that I won the fight [in Las Vegas]. That is why I came for the rematch ... I am professor of boxing. What I can do Fenech cannot do half, that is why I am back to prove to you [Australian fans] I am the best.

He declared 'I am gonna knock him out 'cos my punches are heavier ... first fight I did not feel his punches'. He stated that the fight was 'another chance' for Fenech, but he would be out before round seven (*Nelson vs Fenech Highlights II* n.d.).

Incidentally, the history of championship rematch fights after draws in international boxing is interesting. On the eve of the Azumah Nelson and Jeff Fenech rematch, that history revealed that challengers had won eight of fifteen times after a draw. Only twice after a draw had a rematch resulted in a second draw. The first happened when Jimmy Barry fought Casper Leon for the world bantamweight title on May 30, 1898 and December 29, 1898. Both twenty-round matches ended in draws. The second happened when Harry Lewis fought Willie Lewis for the world welterweight title on February 19, 1910 and April 23, 1910. Both twenty-five round bouts ended in draws. Was Fenech going to invoke these historic events and make history by drawing again with Azumah Nelson? The odds for a draw in Fenech's engagement were 33-1. Considering how prepared both fighters were for a milestone victory, a draw was highly unlikely.

The fight occurred at the Princes Park Football Ground in Melbourne, Victoria. Arthur Mercante was the referee and Harry Gibbs, Tom Kaczmarek and Rudy Ortega were the judges. Fenech, who had repeated in interviews that 'draws doesn't [sic] mean anything' promised his fans that: 'I am fighting for the whole country; I will get the job done.' However, he went down once in round one and again in round two. He was again floored in round eight. A cheering crowd of more than 30 000 urged him to become vertical but the referee decided to save the Aussie from any irreversible bodily damage. 'I decided to give him a chance to recover but he could not, he couldn't take any more [beating]', referee Mercante recalled (*PDG*, March 2, 1992, 1, 8). Fenech was thus stopped, completely and totally, in round eight.

This spectacular stoppage was surprisingly referred to as 'Upset of the Year 1992' by the popular boxing magazine known as *The Ring* in 1992.²² It beats logical comprehension how a well-executed victory like that from an accomplished boxing champion could be described as an upset by that renowned boxing magazine. The champion had predicted a KO and he executed it completely. It devastated and left

Fenech with bodily pain and a battered face, and rendered his fans heartbroken (Abayateye, *PDG*, March 3, 1992, 15). Mrs Fenech wept beside her ego-shattered husband in reaction to their pain and anguish (Kissiedu, *GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 1). The champion was an ace fighter and his victory should not have surprised *The Ring*. Although many enthusiasts had been optimistic about Fenech; they were proved wrong. ‘The Australians laughed at me’, said the champion, ‘but I showed them’, he charged. Estimated to have been watched by 120 million viewers in the USA, Britain, France, Spain, Thailand, South America and the Scandinavian countries (Kissiedu, *GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 1, 5), the fight, which was also watched by thousands in Africa and Oceania, commenced in horrible weather conditions. Call it ‘Rumble in the Pond’; it took place on rain-hit canvas. Fenech, 27 years old, was younger than the champion. Dressed in black, his entry was heralded by a tumultuous welcome from his home crowd. His countenance was expressionless. In contrast, boos greeted the about 34-year-old trim and confident champion during his entry and introduction by the ring announcer Ray Connelly. However, the few dancing and rain-drenched Ghanaian fans around cheered him. Wearing an all-white robe, he approached the ring accompanied by an amplified Christian gospel song of the Ghanaian duo called Tagoe Sisters. The lyrics of the song were inspiring: ‘*Amen, Amen, I am not moved by what I see, Hallelujah. I am not moved by what I feel, Hallelujah ... Amen ...*’. He wore a typical Ghanaian-styled crown of an indigenous chief, which was studded with pieces of golden buttons (Kissiedu, *GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 5). His shorts had the national colours – Red, Yellow, Green and Black. He silently recited some words to himself (Kissiedu, *GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 5). Was it a prayer, the Lord’s Prayer or Psalm 23 maybe, or words of affirmation to invigorate his psyche? Nonetheless, the victory against Fenech was undoubtedly a product of long years of sustained self-sacrifice, discipline and devotion to his chosen career. These are what make legends.

The crown he wore was a surprising spectacle. The ornament was a West Africa-derived indigenous symbol of political authority. In Ghana, such adornments were customarily worn by chiefs within some of the indigenous polities. So, what was he signifying? Was he telling the world, Fenech, and Australia that he was the chief or king or *mantse* or *ohene*²³ of boxing? Was it a symbolic message to the world that he was ‘indisputably’ the boxing-*hene*²⁴ (chief of boxing), which incidentally was a title and alias conferred on him by SWAG in 1989? (Mensah, *GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 4).

Rain poured over the canvas from the top of a gazebo-like structure set over the ring erected on the football field. The second knockdown of Fenech seemed partly the result of the slippery surface.²⁵ Therefore, a group of assistants mopped the canvas between the rounds. Zealous fans defied the chilly March torrents and stood under ‘brollies’ and in ponchos and anoraks. Most fans in Ghana were also glued to TVs at different venues. The two boxers sized up each other in round one. Midway, there was



a clinch! Fenech lowered his guard and a booming right went to his head, and down he went. He beat the mandatory count and attacked. Approximately twenty-six seconds before the end of round two, Fenech slipped on the puddle and fell. But he got up. Later, Fenech in annoyance put his knee, in karate-style, into the champion's lower body when the bell tolled for recess.

In rounds four, five and six the crowd roaringly cheered Fenech's fighting tenacity. Fenech won round seven.

In round eight the champion attacked ferociously. Like lightning and a thunderbolt, a wicked right dropped Fenech. The referee stepped in. The fighting resumed after the mandatory count, but the referee stopped the fight to avert unnecessary punishment and damage to Fenech.

Ferdie Pacheco interviewed the excited winner in the ring. 'The Professor took the student to school', Pacheco said. He responded: 'That's right. I told ... them I will teach him ... Now that I knock him out, like I said before "I will beat the guy and then after I beat him, I will show him his mistakes"'. Pacheco mentioned that his 'left jab was a thing of beauty and in control of the fight'. Beaming with confidence, in the post-match interview which was transmitted on the GBC TV, he replied: 'That's right. You know that is why I [am] call[ed] Professor. You can't ... nobody can name you Professor without nothing. They know the reason why they name me Professor'. Having projected himself as a boxer cum 'educationist', by describing himself as 'the Professor' (Abayateye, *PDG*, March 3, 1992, 15), an accolade which soon gained international popularity, and adding that: 'Now that I have beaten him, I [the Professor] will teach him [the student] his mistakes' (*GT*, March 2, 1992, 1), he challenged Whitaker to a rematch. He, who reportedly earned more than US\$750 000, said 'I want to prove to Whitaker that I am the best' (*PDG*, March 2, 1992, 1). As reported in the *GT* on March 2, he declared that he was ready to fight for the WBC and IBF lightweight titles. He praised Fenech's courage and opined that the title would go to Fenech when he relinquished it. He compared his victory over Fenech to a 'father' imparting his experience to a 'son'. He declared: 'I know better than the guy ... Like I told you before, the fight is (was) like a father and son [act]. When your son is fond of misbehaving you have to check him' (Abayateye, *PDG*, March 3, 1992, 15). Hence, when Pacheco asserted that the fight was 'almost like a professor teaching a student today because his left jab was so educated', Fenech replied 'I have never underestimated him ... he is a great champion and he proved it'.

The champion declared that Fenech was a friend but that he had to beat him 'because it was business', and suavely encouraged him: 'Don't stop boxing because I am going to move up to take Pernell Whitaker's title and after that the super-featherweight division will be yours. No one can beat you in that division'. Fenech nodded in agreement to that observation from the boxing 'professor'. In his thirties,

the champion exuded the same effective power that he radiated on Wilfredo Gomez, when he was 26 years old, against Fenech, who was in his twenties, even in mix-ups, where Fenech was known to be dreadful.

Was the champion not growing old? Having glorified his legendary status with that great victory, was he ready to retire? No, he was not, because he had disclosed his intention for a rematch with Whitaker.

Ghana was jubilant. Fans in Bukom and Ga-Mashie were euphoric (*GT*, March 2, 1992, 1) because of their 'homeboy', *tabilo*, and hero. Loud cheers reverberated through Adedemkpo and Timber Market as the population sang and kept vigil with huge bonfires to celebrate his victory.

As highlighted, Ga-Mashie folks have a custom of composing praise songs for their warriors and boxing heroes. Roy Ankrah, Attuquaye (Atukwei) Clottey, and D.K. Poison received some. Consequently, songs were composed for Azumah Nelson as a professional boxing world champion. In celebrating the newest victory of their hero, the existing fan clubs in Accra, namely the Adedemkpo Azumah Nelson Fan Club and the *Kaanye mo bi*²⁶ Zoom Zoom Fan Club, sang their praise songs. These included this famous one in *kolomashi* style:

Azumah baayi le (2x)
Bo fee bo ni ebaafee
Azumah baayi le jogbann

It translates as:

Azumah will beat him (name of the contender) (2x)
 Whatever he will do
 Azumah will beat him very well [severely].

In a personal interview on March 14, 2009, Kwaku Dua Bannerman told me that this well-liked song was usually sung by members and non-members of Champ's support base for morale and to extol him after a victory, and/or when he visited his old neighbourhoods in Ga-Mashie.

His fans in Mamprobi kept vigil at the popular 'Methodist Park' and 'The Hawk' pub to watch his fight via the national TV network. They joined other jubilant and proud patriotic fans from parts of Accra to sing and wave the Ghanaian flag in street carnivals and processions (*GT*, March 2, 1992). One fan, Mr Charles Nkansah Oware, told the *GT* that such jubilant demonstrations on that Sunday were imperative because the boxer kept the flag of Ghana still flying high on the international scene. He proudly quipped: 'After the match a lot of Australians will purchase a globe or an atlas to locate where Ghana is, something they will never do under normal circumstances or if Fenech had won' (*GT*, March 2, 1992).



Incidentally, Ghanaians were not the only people who engaged in the nationwide euphoria. Some non-Ghanaian residents were glad. Hundreds of Liberian refugees displaced by the Liberian civil war who were staying at the Buduburam camp in the Central Region of Ghana kept vigil to support the boxer. Emmanuel Geeza Williams reported in the *GS* of March 3–9, 1992 that some who watched the fight on a car battery-powered 16-inch black and white TV, because of a general cut in electricity supply to the camp, had cheered him. Shouting slogans like ‘Kill him Azumah’, ‘Finish him off’, ‘we Ghanaians are the very best’, they felt proud to be in Ghana, and honoured to cheer with the nation. Tapping into the democratised spirit of ‘Ghanaianness’, they celebrated the victory with other Ghanaians. Indubitably, his success made them feel proud as Africans and honorary Ghanaians.

The jubilation and satisfaction that his victory bequeathed to Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians proved that his legendary position within the boxing and social histories of Ghana was assured. Whether or not he, like Thomas ‘Hitman’ Hearns, Sugar Ray Leonard and Roberto Duran, would succeed in clinching a fourth title, there was no doubt that his fistic abilities in the featherweight and super-featherweight divisions were going to be venerated worldwide.

The Ghana government congratulated him for ‘winning again for Ghana’. It was politically imperative and wise for the ‘establishment’ to demonstrate support for his fights and victories. They had the potential to serve, and had, apparently, provided certain national conditions which were necessary for the nation’s socioeconomic growth and important for the government’s running of the country. These conditions included spontaneous periods of general jubilation and feelings of unity among Ghanaians. They engineered a sense of collective rejoicing in his winnings as Ghanaians. Furthermore, they provided recreational outlets for relaxation and invigoration to stressed minds and bodies in Ghana. This was necessary to produce a healthy working force for productive labour in the country. Aware of these benefits from the boxer’s image, fights and victories to nation building, the government, which had wished him success, sent him a congratulatory message for his victory. In addition, Amarkai Amarteifio, ‘doffing his hat’ to him, wrote, ‘Congratulations, Mighty Warrior. You have not only taken us back to San Juan, Puerto Rico, you have avenged the robbery of Attuquaye Clottey in Australia many years ago. Well done’ (*PDG*, March 2, 1992, 15). But how and why did the vengeance of a ‘robbery’ emerge in the goodwill message? Incidentally, the victory was interpreted, by some boxing fans, like Amarteifio, as a significant national victory, because in another interesting context, it wiped away a ‘theft’ that was visited on the professional boxing career of the former trainer of Azumah Nelson and Ghanaian professional boxing in the 1950s. In the opinion of people like Amarteifio, his victory avenged his former trainer. Rationalising it in the context of a national vengeance, the former national secretary

of sports recalled an incident in the history of Ghana's professional boxing unknown to many young boxing enthusiasts in 1992. For him and others who had followed Ghana boxing since the 1940s and 1950s, it was an unforgettable incident. In the late 1950s, Attuquaye Clottey, according to Amarteifio, fought John [sic] (George) Barnes in Australia on different occasions for the Commonwealth Welterweight Title,²⁷ but he was robbed on each occasion (*PDG*, March 2, 1992, 15). It was this alleged painful robbery of a Ghanaian boxer that the victory over the Australian in Australia avenged.

The *Ghanaian Times* reported on March 2, 1992 that many corporate entities, apparently interested in boxing, such as the plush Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra, had also sent him congratulatory messages (*GT*, March 2, 1992, 7). Some conspicuously appeared in Ghanaian newspapers. The open association with his iconic persona was a diplomatic advertisement of the commercial interests and image of such entities to the public. Other well-wishers suggested in the newspapers that the Order of the Volta or any of the State awards for distinguished excellence and merit should be conferred on him (*Christian Chronicle* 1992, 4). Meanwhile, some unsatisfied Australian fans and promoters requested another rematch in 1992, but his interest was in a lightweight contest against Whitaker. Such a fight promised huge monetary profit, so some Australian promoters who wanted the fight in Melbourne tried to woo him with about five million dollars. Reportedly, one revealed to the BBC that each of the two fighters had received over one million dollars from their fight in March, 1992. However, he opined that Azumah Nelson 'will earn more [than what he expects to earn] when he fights Pernell Sweet Pea Whitaker' (Menya, *Weekend*, March 5–12, 1992, 1). Subsequent reports claimed that Carl King and Sydney's Bill Mordey had made preliminary plans for him to fight in a world title doubleheader in Melbourne in the latter part of 1992 or early 1993 (*GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 1, 8). It was envisaged that he and Fenech would fight for the WBC lightweight title and super-featherweight titles respectively in Melbourne. Their fight in Melbourne on March 1 had been a commercial success. Therefore, the business-savvy Kings naturally saw Melbourne, if made to host a doubleheader that would see the two fighters involved, as a goldmine. However, it seemed that a clash between Azumah Nelson and Whitaker could and might happen only if the latter did not vacate the lightweight title. Otherwise, he would have to contest another contender for that title, possibly Darryl Tyson from the USA. In such an envisaged doubleheader it seemed Fenech could fight either Puerto Rico's Juan 'John' Molina or Gabriel Ruelas from Mexico.



Azumah Nelson defends his title against Calvin Grove and Gabriel Ruelas, 1992–1993

Before he was driven through the city of Accra to display his title, he briefed the officials and media personnel that his early departure to fight Fenech was orchestrated to shield him from the pessimistic comments of some fans. Kwei Mensah, in an article titled 'The Two Dreams of Azumah' in the *GV* of March 9–16, 1992, wrote that like Muhammad Ali, who considered himself 'great', and easily boasted: 'I am the Greatest' and 'I am beautiful', Azumah Nelson declared: 'What can't I do? When I was leaving ... I told you [Ghanaians] I was going and would come back with my title; I have kept faith with you'. To the doubting Thomases, he said: 'I had not been impressive since I fought that British in London called McDonnell[1] and my performance since then gave the impression I was going down'. His unsuccessful duel with Whitaker, the stretch with Juan La Porte, and the draw with Fenech in Las Vegas did appear to some fans as signs of a possible decline in his power. He disclosed that he had worked hard to overcome the problems that confronted him in those fights before fighting in Australia. Asked whether he was considering retiring, he stated that it was inevitable, but he hoped to see two things happen in the world of boxing before then. Reportedly, a similar query emerged incidentally during an earlier interview abroad by the BBC, on the Monday night after he fought Fenech. He mentioned that he would ultimately like to become a Christian priest after retiring from boxing (*Weekend*, March 5–12, 1992, 1). To atone for 'sins' of unleashing pain on contestants in the ring? No. He did not perceive the sport and fighting, in the context of boxing, as sinful. Noticeably, within the history of boxing, his decision was not new and outlandish. Muhammad Ali once 'reaffirmed his intention to return one day to the role of minister' to propagate the 'message of Islam in the ghettos of America' (Mazrui 1977, 195). It was also like the former heavyweight world champion, George Foreman, who actually became a Christian evangelist after he retired. According to Kwabina Menya in an article titled 'I want to be a Priest', (*Weekend*, March 5–12, 1992, 1), Azumah Nelson wanted to become a priest and use that position to contribute to the 'fight against the injustices, immorality ... and ... the influence which Satan seems to be enjoying now'.

But what other things did he want to see happen before he retired? According to Kwei Mensah in the *GV* of March 9–16, 1992, first, a fight with Hector 'Macho' Camacho or Julio César Chávez, to see who was the best, and second, the rise of another champion from Ghana to succeed him. The desired fights did not happen before he retired. Nevertheless, Ghana produced other world champions, although in comparison with Azumah Nelson, they unfortunately had shorter reigns. Hopefully, longer-reigning ones would be produced in the passage of time.

Significantly, March 1992 was a good month for Ghanaian boxing. Ike Quartey defeated his Filipino opponent, Dindo Canoy, by a round one TKO at the Accra Sports Stadium to take the vacant WBC international light-welterweight title (*GT*, March 20, 1992, 7).

Azumah Nelson and Ike Quartey's victories made Ghanaian sports fans smile, despite their 'mourning' over the Ghana Black Stars' inability to win the African Cup of Nations Football Tournament trophy in Senegal in January 1992, despite reaching the finals.²⁸

President J.J. Rawlings gave Azumah Nelson a fête at his official residence at the Christiansborg Castle on Independence Day, March 6, 1992 in acknowledgement of his success in Melbourne, his proverbial heroism and discipline, the excellent execution of his responsibility as a national ambassador of sports, and Ghana's 'unofficial' diplomat of international relations (*GS*, March 10–16, 1992, 2). Remarkably, he had grown up from the ghetto to claim a majestic position through hard work: dining with kings and sharing jokes with presidents. How wonderful could one's excellence in boxing be? Literary works such as poetry eulogised him in some newspapers, for instance 'Mighty Azumah Nelson!' in the *GS* (March 10–16, 1992, 2). While some reverently said Ayekoo²⁹ to him, others, like Nana Yaw Oppong, of the University of Cape Coast, summarised Ghana's pride in his victory over Fenech and praised him as a legend. One reads as follows:

Azumah 'Zoom Zoom' Nelson ...[y]our authority over FENECH / You have established unequivocally / ... You handed out ...[t]he ...unforgettable lesson ...[th]at Boxing, ...[i]s won with brain and brawn / Never on the crest of racial bigory [sic] (bigotry) / ...[E]ven in ... down under Melbourne, Australia ... [in] a fight... Between Master and Novice! ...a fine history you recorded / ... AYEKOO (congratulations), AZUMAH / ... Fenech ... falls well / ... [b]efore his gods and people / Ayekoo, ... Boxing Professor and Teacher ... Warrior of MIGHTY FISTS ... that ...force... Happy population to cry / ... [and] assemble millions / To tell the secret story – 'Fenech the Son, Azumah the Father' / Yes, ... to ... the world, a master piece / To Ghana, a national VICTORY / Ghana thanks you ... / In ... Turning our Senegal sorrows (due to the inability of Ghana's Black Stars team to win the African Cup of Nations football tournament in Senegal in January 1992) / To JOY in ... Australia / ..., well done, Professor; / Creating ... Jeff a dump [sic] / To paint SIKAMAN (Land of Gold, i.e. Ghana) brighter / And brightest we pray to see.

His victory glorified the Ghana sports scene. Moreover, Ghana boxing received other good credits and international acknowledgement in March. The Ghana and West African bantamweight champion, Rocky Commey, the African Boxing Council (ABC) featherweight champion, Percy Oblitei Commey, the USA-based Commonwealth flyweight champion, Alfred Kotey, and the former WBC super-



flyweight champion, Nana Yaw Konadu all retained their top ratings with the WBC. Furthermore, the WBC, acknowledging Champ's superb success on March 1 in Australia, voted him as boxer for the month of March (*GT*, March 20, 1992, 7). Spectacular KOs and victories were not new to him, but his triumph in Melbourne, which received the greatest of world attentions and made the WBC dedicate March to him, 'signed, sealed, and delivered' his legendary position. Nevertheless, the issues of how to keep the durability and ensure the sustainability of the fame, pride and health of this distinguished Ghanaian citizen elicited concerns from some fans in Ghana. Some opined that his age was not his best ally. Through letters to newspapers many requested him to retire immediately and 'honourably'. Conversely, others suggested that he should do what he liked to do best – fight. The contentious issue of retirement featured in popular discussions in the print and electronic media. Concurrently, the prevailing popular call that 'he should be honoured with a high national order' became more audible. For example, in an open letter sent to the *GS* in March 1992, K.A. Coleman-Paitoo, a past member of the GBA, suggested that Ghana should gratefully give him a fitting national honour to inspire other sportspersons. He claimed that the boxer had 'single-handedly' and assiduously '... raised high the flag of Ghana throughout the world and most people who did not know of our nation's existence have now come to hear of our dear country, Ghana', he added. Citing the conferring of an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) on boxing referee and judge H. Gibbs for his luminary role in the sport, and CBE (Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) on football personalities such as Stanley Matthews and Stanley Rous as illustrative examples, he requested that the Ghana government should confer a high national honour on the boxer. Incidentally, first-rate national, continental and international honours were conferred on him. That aspect of his life and career will be examined in the next chapter.

On the issue of retirement, concerned fans publicly expressed their views. For example, in a letter to *GS* in March 1992, a 60-year-old fan literally 'begged' him to retire. Stating, inter alia, 'This world will always call for the newest record immediately after receiving the greatest record with the hope of getting a still greater record than it has already got' (*GS*, March 24–30, 1992, 2), Obrempon Ahun, the writer, implored him to retire because he had succeeded in becoming a 'living legend', and 'monarch of his natural divisions'. The fan, who affectionately called him 'son', showed interest in his health security. Invoking Joe Frazier, he disclosed that Frazier, who called it quits at the height of his career, gave to the boxing world the riddle: 'who is the greatest of the three, Frazier, Foreman or Muhammad Ali?' He explained that Frazier and Foreman called it quits early, but their compatriot Ali, who lingered on for too long, had his health destroyed through unnecessary beatings. He advised Azumah

Nelson to learn from that. Despite such admonitions, Azumah Nelson did not retire immediately; yet he did not remain in boxing for very much longer or fall prey to the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, like Ali had.

He craved more victories and did not deem 1992 an appropriate year to retire. But he should have known, of course, that juvenile vigour was ephemeral. Nevertheless, he fought eight more boxers before retiring. The fights showed signs that the value of his power was falling victim to diminishing returns. He globetrotted for good paydays with his never-say-die attitude and belief that he had 'surprises' in his punches and 'up his gloves'. He defeated Calvin 'Mr Silky Smooth' Grove, Jesse James Leija and Gabriel Ruelas. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, he recalled:

I knew I had a short time of active boxing left ... in my thirties and ... my body would be pressing me to retire soon, but ... I just loved to box so I had to box. [However,] ... I knew ... I would ... win another title and hang my gloves or another boxer would take the title from me, after all, no one can be a champion forever.

With this mindset he advanced into fights, determined to conquer more opponents and titles. He proceeded into retirement from active professional boxing in 1998 and luckily averted the calamity of an irreparable injury. He returned briefly to box his old rival and fellow retiree Jeff Fenech in an exhibition fund-raiser bout in 2008 to support a philanthropic foundation, a special charity project of his, which will be discussed later.

Younger and ambitious super-featherweight boxers envied his title. On November 7, 1992, he used his rich experience against the title-hungry Calvin Grove, a former world champion, in a bout which Richard Steele refereed at Caesars Tahoe, Stateline, Nevada. In the customary goodwill message to him, Lt Gen. Arnold Quainoo, the government official overseeing affairs of the youth and sports in Ghana, said: 'Our [Ghana's] confidence in your ability to conquer all foes has increased with every fight that you have faced in your career ...' (*PDG*, November 7, 1992, 15).

Grove was a tall, fast-footed and protective boxer from the steel town of Coatesville, Pennsylvania. An early hook floored Grove (*PDG*, November 9, 1992, 1), who progressed with his 'it-will-be-hard-for-you-to-hit-me' antics. Finally, the judges unanimously proclaimed Azumah Nelson the winner. Dave Brown scored the fighters 115-112, Keith MacDonald scored them 114-113 and Doug Tucker's verdict was 116-111. Impressed by Grove's techniques of defence, Azumah Nelson offered to give him a rematch. 'Nobody gave me a chance', said Grove. 'It was a great fight. Number two will even be better', he added. 'Number two' never materialised. Grove, however, told Ken Hissner in an interview in 2008 that: 'He (Azumah) was pressing, but I hit him more and I felt I got robbed' (*Doghouse Boxing Forum*, March 14, 2008). The judges held a different opinion.



Heavy-punching Gabriel Ruelas, born on July 23, 1970 in Yerbabuena, Mexico, and turned professional in 1988, was the next challenger. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, the champion recounted: 'I had heard of him and watched his fight videos ... a tough fighter ... His managers and other[s] ... were confident in him ... because he was younger'. The punches of Ruelas were also literally deadly. Jimmy Garcia died from injuries he sustained from them.

The champion trained intensely to fight in Mexico. In an interview with the BBC he stated that he was not 'old' and was confident of winning. Responding to a probe about the 'secret' behind his well-maintained physique, the approximately 35-year-old boxer disclosed that 'You should know what to do in the morning ... what to eat, don't drink and don't smoke' (*PDG*, February 20, 1993, 14). He predicted: 'Ruelas is ... 22 ... tough ... a trained brawler with good uppercut and body punches but if he decides to stand toe to toe with me, then we will go home early'. The older boxer did not find the fight on February 20, 1993 at the open-air Estadio Azteca in Mexico City an easy one. They fought, according to Carlos Martinez (November 5, 2010), in front of about '132,274 paid attendees', at one of Don King's productions – the 'Grand Slam of Boxing', which King described as the 'greatest boxing show on earth' (*PDG*, February 20, 1993, 14.). According to the *Guinness Book of World Records* the largest boxing crowd in history had been about 120 757. This was at the September 23, 1926 heavyweight title fight in Philadelphia between Gene Tunney and Jack Dempsey. Many of the Mexican flag-carrying fans were also eager for the evening's 'major card' (principal bout) between homeboy Chávez, the WBC super-lightweight champion, and Greg Haugen. It was estimated that another 400 million watched the fights via television.

Incidentally, as Azumah Nelson later hinted, two of the all-Mexican judges, initially selected, were changed when his side protested (*PDG*, February 22, 1993, 1, 15). Consequently, Tom Kaczmarek, José Medina Solares and Dae-Eun Chung judged and José Guadalupe Garcia refereed. The champion's support in Mexico City was minimal, but it was big in Ghana. According to Kate Hudson, the General Secretary of the Azumah Nelson Keep Fit and Fan Club, Mr E.C. Essien, appealed in newspapers to Champ's nationwide fandom to support him with vigils and prayers (Hudson, *PDG*, February 20, 1993, 14). Many obliged. During the fight, Ruelas's incessant clinching and pushing and the referee's tête-à-tête in Spanish, which the champion could not understand, frustrated him. He later complained about the clinching and pushing and of the referee's complicity for not warning Ruelas (*PDG*, February 22, 1993, 1, 15). In the *PDG*, on February 26, he explained that the frequent tête-à-tête 'made me angry, which led to my loss of concentration' (*PDG*, February 26, 1993, 15). The referee later explained to him that they were warnings against the 'rough' tactics of Ruelas. Nevertheless, he advanced to victory

with a cut at the back of his head from a butt from Ruelas. After Tom Kaczmarek, José Medina Solares and Dae-Eun Chung scored 115-114, 115-115, and 115-113 in his favour, Ruelas unceremoniously stalked out of the ring and the huge crowd booed at the verdict.

The bout was shown live on the GBC TV to fans in Ghana by the sponsorship of state institutions like the Social Security and National Insurance Trust (SSNIT), Posts and Telecommunications Corporation (P&T), Ministry of Information and Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (*PDG*, February 20, 1993, 14). The government issued a congratulatory message to the champion. On February 24, the *PDG* published 'GBA Greets Azumah', a message from the GBA, signed by the chairman of the GBA Nii Coffie Ajenkwa (Agyenkwa) III, which stated: '... you have once again demonstrated your greatness in the fistic sport to retain your crown'. It added: 'Your achievement will no doubt continue to inspire young boxers to win more laurels for our nation' (*PDG*, February 20, 1993, 14). The River Park (Boxing) Promotions and Management Syndicate also dispatched a congratulatory message. Signed by its president, Alhaji Muhammed Murtala, it stated, *inter alia*, that: 'the boxing fraternity appreciates your performance in faraway Mexico'. It praised his self-discipline and urged the youth in boxing and other fields of positive endeavour to emulate it.

Adios Amigo! Azumah Nelson and Don King part ways

Meanwhile, it seemed that Azumah Nelson was simultaneously contemplating whether he should or should not maintain his professional relationship with his promoters, the Kings, in the event of a fight with Whitaker and other future endeavours. He also nurtured a desire to fight and defeat the lightweight titlist. In fact, according to Frank Mensah, weeks after his fight with Fenech, he told a group of orphans that he visited at the Osu Children's Home and Tema SOS Village in Ghana that: 'Wherever Whitaker goes, I'll chase him, even if I hear he is at the Achimota forest [in Ghana] presently, I'll fight him there' (Mensah, *GS*, March 24–30, 1992, 3). It sounded hilarious but it showed his determination. In a personal interview on October 5, 2009 he recalled:

Yes I needed him 'badly' ... to beat him. [However] we never met. Formal arrangements and agreements in my camp could not be reached ... a ... contract ... could not go through. We have now retired. He was a great fighter. One of the best, and I learnt a lot from him.

Nonetheless, he disclosed that he would be interested in the doubleheader plan by the Kings and the Sydney promoter only at the right price (*GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 1, 8). Why that stipulation? Well, it seemed that behind all the facade of victory against



Fenech, the cordiality between him and his administrators was not very sound. A management-oriented issue, likely to be resolved by judicial arbitrator, was brewing tension between them. It was reported that whilst in Melbourne for the fight with Fenech, he had thought of a legal arbitration between him and Don King (*Sp*, March 7, 1992, 16). Consequently, after the fight, he proceeded to legally settle problems with his 'boss' in New York (Menya, *Weekend*, March 5-12, 1992, 1). The underlying reason? He wanted to part ways with the King empire, which he had been with from about 1982 to 1992. Perhaps he felt experienced enough to oversee his own promotions and thought he deserved more money, since an issue of the *Daily Telegraph* February 1992 mentioned that one third of all his winnings went to the promoter (as reported by the *Sp*, March 7, 1992, 16). So, by March 1992 he wanted out of the contract that had legally defined their professional relationship. He boldly decided to journey on his own and to place the arrangements of his fights where he saw fit.

Growth and independence are products of nature. Children must grow, apprentices must become masters. By 1992 he was a matured 'professor' – a don in his own right. And because 'a don should not be under another don', he decided to be free to take his own decisions.

In New York, in 1992, he legally succeeded against the flamboyant Don King who, with Carl King and Ringcraft's assistance, had been the boxer's ultimate foreign promoter and overall boss from about 1982. Their relationship, which Samuel Kissiedu in an article titled 'Don King Frees Azumah' in the *GS* of March 10–16, 1992 called 'the 10-years old "master-slave" promotional relation', was legally terminated after tough negotiations. Nevertheless, he manoeuvred and broke his relationship with the Kings and their alliance with Ringcraft. He was now free to assume control of managing and promoting his career. Reportedly, a letter to that effect was shown to the *GS*. It was signed by him, Don King and a New York-based lawyer. It stated, inter alia, that 'all promotional rights existing between Azumah [Nelson] and Don King are abrogated with effect from March 4, 1992'. Aware that he might have some future deals with Don King, he mentioned that he would decide whether the former managers would still be entitled to thirty-three per cent of his purse.

The 'parting of ways' was a crucial *rite de passage* in his personal and career advancement. His genesis from the 'trenches of obscurity' of amateur and professional boxing was humble yet toughening. As a professional champion, he fought strongly and demonstrated devoted sacrifice and dedication to his managers for about a decade. He learnt and understood the vocation of promoters as well as the dynamics, illusions and actualities in the administration business of international professional boxing. Subsequently, the disengagement in 1992 signalled the coming of age – the maturing – of him as a 'businessman', confident to navigate his boxing business and financial affairs. His self-confidence and can-do spirit also gave him the verve to

delink himself from a so-called 'master-slave relation' that had existed since 1982. However, he deemed his erstwhile allies as important social contacts and associates in the boxing industry. Hence, he sustained an amicable professional relationship with them and maintained strong respect for Don King, whom he referred to 'as a good person' in 2008.³⁰

During the negotiations to dissolve the partnership, Champ's mind was also occupied by thoughts of returning to Ghana to use his presence to inspire Ghana's Ike 'Machine Gun' Quartey,³¹ who was fighting for the WBC international light-welterweight (junior-welterweight or super-lightweight) crown in Accra on March 7, 1992, to victory. He returned on time for the fight. The public, media, and government representatives, including Mr E.T. Mensah, the Deputy Secretary for Youth and Sports, and Allotey (Allotei) Cofie, the Chairman of the GBA, gave him a tumultuous welcome at the national airport in Accra (*GT*, March 7, 1992, 7). His family, including three of his children, were also there to welcome him and show appreciation for his successful defence, gallantry and the pride that he bestowed on the government and people of Ghana, and of Africa (*Sp*, March 7, 1992, 16). His convoy, which was escorted by state-backed dispatch motorbike riders, moved through Accra's principal streets and he gloriously displayed his title to the cheer of Ghanaian flag-toting fans.

A contested draw, 1993

Ruelas asked for a rematch, which was possible because the champion was also not completely satisfied with the close scoring from the judges. The champion boxer, who had had fights in Mexico before, asserted:

Fighting a Mexican in Mexico City, you will have to thank God when you are declared winner ... I won, no matter how close it was made to look. (*PDG*, February 24, 1993, 14)

'I proved that I was the Professor', he added. He stated in a post-match interview that 'I'll be around for the next two to three years ... I'll only think of retiring when I feel tiredness ... As at now, I think I can go on'. On the morrow of the fight, he explained to the BBC that 'I love boxing ... I won't retire now and ... come back like some others who quit and realise later that they can't stay away from the sport they love'. Consequently, after retirement, he did not attempt a 'crusade' for a title.

On his return to Ghana on February 24, 1993, he told his fans that: 'It was not an easy fight ... Ruelas was tough and rough and he had prepared very well for the fight' (*PDG*, February 26, 1993, 15). He admitted being ineffective because, having suffered a flu attack the day before the fight that affected his fitness, he was too cautious and did not want Ruelas to hit him. Promising to 'whip Ruelas like a baby'



in any imagined or possible Azumah Nelson–Gabriel Ruelas II, he added: ‘next time Ruelas won’t be able to use his rough tactics on me again – like holding my head and punching at the same time’.

Like he had done for Villasana and Fenech, he agreed to give Ruelas a rematch ‘... to show the world that I was still good.’ The rematch did not take place immediately. Jesse James ‘the Texas Tornado’ Leija, from Texas, confronted him on September 10, 1993. It became the first of their intensive four-fight series. These exciting four, according to Leija, defined his career. He disclosed that:

Undoubtedly the four fights I had with Azumah are what I look back upon in recalling the greatest thrills of my career ... Anytime you have a chance to go forty-two rounds with one of the all-time greats ... you are bound to learn something. (Donovan, *The Sweet Science*, February 21, 2005)

Leija’s professional debut occurred on October 2, 1988. He took the NABF featherweight crown from José Luis Martínez in 1992, and defended it once against another world champion, Louie Espinoza, in March 1993. He followed this with his onslaught on the ‘older’ Azumah Nelson in front of over 63 000 fans in an ‘undercard’ to the Chávez–Whitaker pay-per-view (PPV) bout at the Alamodome, in San Antonio, Texas. It was estimated that Whitaker and Chávez stood to gain about US\$2.5 million and US\$5 million respectively from the major card of the WBC welterweight championship. The prize money and aspiration to revive the greater confidence of his fans in his winning abilities inspired Azumah Nelson’s participation at the Alamodome. He also desired to retain his place as a notable boxer among the key performers for that night, Chávez and Whitaker, and thereby ensure his position in the Chávez–Whitaker–Azumah Nelson trio, which then had the reputation of ‘keeping boxing’s busiest divisions alive’.

What were the apparent strengths of Leija, who wanted to follow Robert Quiroga as the second fighter from San Antonio in boxing history to capture a world title? He was young, with an aggressive style, and good skills and movement. The Azumah Nelson Fan Club appealed to Champo’s fans to keep vigils to support him in a fight that many thought would be the champion’s last hurrah. According to the *PDG* (September 10, 1993, 15), the GBA urged him to ‘ensure a total victory’. Signed by the GBA chairman, Nii Quaye Mensah, the statement read: ‘your victory which should be total and undisputed, would bring back smiles on the faces of Ghanaian sports fans and the entire country ... The GBA wishes you all the best and the whole nation is wholly behind you ... [T]he national anthem and ... national flag would ginger you to victory’, it added. Such statements and messages were useful because,

...throughout my professional career, such messages helped me ... to boost my morale ... focus psychologically and ... to think that I was always fighting first

for Ghana ... They strengthened my confidence ... necessary in everything that we do, [and] think that the nation and government were solidly behind me. That made me to give all my best in the fights. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2010)

The fight was one of the best-fought super-featherweight title championships in 1993. The few Ghanaian fans at the Alamodome chanted and sang to support him. A late rally allowed him to attain a disputed draw after twelve rounds of fighting (*PDG*, September 13, 1993, 1). No knockdowns occurred, despite the frequent pound-for-pound exchange of blows in the middle of the ring. At the end of the match, refereed by Jerry McKenzie, many of the Texan spectators believed that Leija had won. Judges Laurence Cole from Texas, Keith Dadzie from Ghana and Daniel Van de Wiele from Belgium provided the final verdict. These technocrats perceived the fight differently. Incidentally, the verdict was initially announced, erroneously, by the droning ring announcer Jimmy Lennon, Jr, as a win by a split decision (SD) for Azumah Nelson. Then as Leija was coming to terms with the announcement of his 'supposed' first professional loss, the announcer returned after several minutes to announce a discrepancy in the scoring (Hissner, *Doghhouse Boxing Forum*, January 2, 2011). Many of the pro-Texan fans and Leija were delighted about the optimism which this turn in events promised. Contrary to the expectation of the Texan fans for victory, the judges met them halfway. Judges Cole, Dadzie and Van de Wiele deemed the fight a draw. Nursing his swollen and closing left eye with an icepack, Leija, at a post-fight press conference, averred: 'Every fighter knows in his heart when he's won a fight. I know I won the fight' (Houston, *ESPN Boxing*, March 26, 2008). Incidentally, the gruelling Chávez vs Whitaker major card for the night also ended in a draw (*PDG*, September 13, 1993, 14).

The champion returned to Ghana. The requests for him to retire continued. He did not oblige. Why not, since it seemed he was 'slipping'? Was the end near? Well, it appeared so and, shortly, it was so.

Can he be blamed squarely for staying on when it was apparent that he was getting 'rusty'? No. Often the more valuable a boxer is, the more myopic, and, in a figurative sense, the blinder they, and particularly their promoters and managers, become to the fact that valuable and champion boxers are not invincible. Many promoters, managers and corner-men, and some fans of victory-bringing and cash-raking boxers often fall victim to the illusion that valuable boxers are indestructible. Consequently, such groups are commonly tempted by self-interest to continue to push valuable boxers into more fights, which often yield mediocre or even poor results from the fighters. It seems that Azumah Nelson, his camp and some of his fans fell victim to this rule. Urged on by his stubbornness, his camp and some of his die-hard fans, he continued to box even when there were signs that his boxing verve



and performance were diminishing. Moreover, another temptation, perhaps, made him adamant. Like what happens to many fading movie stars who, after considering retirement and/or retiring, often hear the seductive yell of their fans and public: 'You are young! You still have the sparkle. You are invincible. Do not go now. No! Come back to us' and, unable to resist such blandishments, discard the thought of retirement and revert to their profession, the boxer also fell victim to such seductions from some of his fans. The temptation consciously or otherwise lured this popular icon to remain in the sport even when the law of diminishing returns was clearly operating against him in his fights. Apparently, the benefits of the sport, 'mad' love for it, feelings of invincibility and the determination to please his fans were major factors that anchored him in the ring, especially after his first fight with Leija. He recounted in a personal interview on October 9, 2009 that: 'I felt that ... as long as I was winning ... they were happy. So I stayed on ...' and, consequently, he battled Leija to whom he had earlier promised a rematch.

On May 7, 1994, Don King staged what he called 'Revenge: The Rematches', at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. One of the largest boxing PPV events ever staged, it was named the 'Ring Magazine event of the year for 1994'. It was the first time that a quintet of world title fights was staged in one night. A quartet of rematch bouts for the night comprised Julio César Chávez vs Frankie Randall, Azumah Nelson vs Jesse James Leija, Gerald McClellan vs Julian Jackson, and Terry Norris vs Simon Brown. The show also included a title bout between Kermin Guardia and Ricardo Lopez.

Rematch: Jesse J. Leija defeats Champ

The Azumah Nelson-Jesse James Leija II encounter led the PPV portion of the show. 'Leija seemed better than the first time', he recounted. The titlist's performance clearly showed that the 'beginning of the end' had come. The stem that he had been gnawing, like a beaver would do to a tree, finally broke. Ghanaian fans missed a heartbeat when Leija knocked him down in round two. 'We asked him to retire', many must have said then and ultimately when Leija was declared the winner by a unanimous decision after the twelfth round. 'It was without a doubt disappointing ... I started to think of retiring right there, but ... I again changed my mind. I wanted to meet Leija again to take the title and maybe just retire', he recalled in 2009. Leija became and remained the only fighter ever to beat him in a rematch. 'Without a doubt, [it] was the pinnacle of my career', was how Leija recalled the title-winning effort (Donovan, *The Sweet Science*, February 21, 2005). 'Leija's performance was good', he commented. 'Winning and losing is part of boxing ... Leija beat me on that day: [Fair and square] ... I knew that tomorrow [in the near future], if I did not retire ... I would ... whip him, but on that day [in May], Leija was the better man', he later

confessed. In his endearing trait as a good sportsman, he always spoke well about his contenders and opponents, regardless of the outcome of his bouts with them.

Notwithstanding the loss, he was still legendary in the eyes of Ghanaian fans. He offered no excuses for his loss and never verbally demeaned Leija's victory. Up till today, he makes the honest statement that: 'Leija beat me'. Leija had accomplished what many boxers had failed to do in many years. However, his joy and status as champion were transient and soon truncated. About four months after he became champion, he had a raw deal from Gabriel Ruelas. Excruciating pain from a torn ligament ultimately overcame and weakened Leija in his fight with Ruelas. Consequently, Ruelas outpointed Leija to win. That was the last time Leija entered or left the ring as a WBC world champion. However, he fought Azumah Nelson again in 1996 and 1998.

Azumah Nelson did not engage in another bout in 1994. Meanwhile, the WBC proceeded to honour his prodigious position in the super-featherweight division. At its 31st Convention, which opened on October 31, 1994 in Seville, the WBC honoured him and other champions like D.K. Poison and Hogan 'Kid' Bassey (MBE) for their accomplishments in boxing. Ghana's Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III, who was the vice-president of the WBC, Cameroon's Dr Joseph Fofe, who presided over the ABU for most of the 1970s and 1980s, and the late Chief Ralph Akin Ogunbufumi of Nigeria, a former secretary treasurer of the ABC, were also honoured for contributing to boxing's growth in Africa (*DG*, November 1, 1994, 13).

Incidentally, Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III submitted the names of Ghanaian boxers for ratings at the WBC convention. He lobbied so that Azumah Nelson, who had recently suffered a defeat, would be rated. After the defeat, his top position in his division fell. He therefore requested the Council to re-instate him. The lobbying of Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III at the convention led to his re-instatement as number one contender to the super-featherweight title (*DG*, November 10, 1994, 14), a title which had passed to Ruelas on September 17, 1994. The official of the WBC disclosed to delighted fans in Ghana that the re-instatement was approved by the board of governors by a majority decision. Now Azumah Nelson could easily press for a match against the title holder. Restless for a title fight, it appeared that he had earlier accepted to challenge Oscar De La Hoya of the USA for his lightweight crown in Las Vegas. The *DG* reported that in a Voice of America (VOA) satellite interview monitored in Accra on November 24, it emerged that he had already accepted the fight, expected to take place in the second week of February 1995. However, his re-instatement encouraged him to search for a fight with Ruelas. Consequently, the envisaged fight with De La Hoya did not materialise. He started negotiating for a fight to either take the title or give Ruelas a chance to avenge his defeat. Confident of avenging his defeat in Mexico City in 1993, Ruelas, who beat Leija, the beater of Azumah Nelson,



accepted the challenge. The fight was scheduled to take place on December 1, 1995 at the Fantasy Springs Casino, Indio, California. The globetrotter prepared to steamroll Ruelas. Rematches, as history revealed, normally spelt doom for his opponents.

Champ grabs the super-featherweight title from Gabriel Ruelas, 1995

Ruelas, who defended the title twice, including a round eleven TKO of Jimmy Garcia of Columbia who later died in hospital from the injuries he sustained from Ruelas, lost it to Azumah Nelson through a round five TKO. The Ghanaian boxer, who had not fought for nineteen months but predicted beating Ruelas ‘like a baby’, became champion again. He had promised his fans the title as their Christmas present. He trained hard and did not indulge in the luxuries and distractions of hotel life and gambling halls in Las Vegas. On the night of the fight, in December 1995, he pitched his little tent dressing room, just a few paces away from that of Ruelas and his trainer Joe Goosen, in a parking space close to a casino down the road from Palm Springs. The jubilant handful of Ghanaian fans and technical people performed *asafô* war chants and drum and bell-backed *kolomashi* songs to support him in the fight.

How did the fight go? Ruelas went down in round one. He got up and fought. The challenger waited for the right time to go in for the *coup de grâce*. A cracking left punch went to the stomach and liver of Ruelas in round four and down he went on his knees and elbows. By the refereeing grace of Marty Denkin, he beat the count. Ruelas admitted later that he was sick and all he wanted to do was to protect his stomach (Hoffer, *Sports Illustrated*, December 11, 1995, 1–2). In round five the challenger succeeded in putting Ruelas into a neutral corner and battered him there. Referee Denkin saw that Ruelas was being wasted so he stopped the fight at one minute and twenty seconds into the round. Ruelas’s corner strongly protested, but the experienced referee knew better. He did not want Ruelas to end up like Jimmy Garcia.

Azumah Nelson had shocked the world. He had lived up to his promise of becoming a champion again. ‘Considering ... preparedness ... I knew, as I said in the [post-match] interview in the ring, that “Ruelas was not a match for me”’, he recounted on October 5, 2009. Ruelas later revealed that he was not, or had not been, physically and mentally well for the fight. He stated that he was bloated – full of gas, nauseous and had hot and cold flashes. He told Richard Hoffer of *Sports Illustrated*:

I was sick, so sick I thought about not even doing the fight ... But there were too many people [in attendance] and I thought that if only I could get out into the fresh air, and once the fight begin ... well, that’s what I thought. When the fight started, and I didn’t feel any better, I just wanted to get it over with. (December 11, 1995, 1–2)

Whether or not he was physically sick and/or had been haunted to his defeat by an apparition of Garcia that he claimed manifested just beyond the referee's shoulder at the conclusion of the fight (Hoffer, *Sports Illustrated*, December 11, 1995, 1–2), he lost painfully.

The champion did not box for about a year. He later accepted a challenge from Jesse James Leija. Many aficionados who thought he would retire after reclaiming the title had their hopes dashed. 'I just could not retire ... I felt strong to continue', he reasoned (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). He fought Leija for the third time on June 1, 1996 in a contest which the Harvard Law School graduate and boxing promoter Bob Arum, a major business rival of Don King, labelled as one of the greatest bouts in boxing history.

Bob Arum, the founder and CEO of the Las Vegas-based Top Rank boxing promotion company, praised the fighters at a pre-fight press conference on May 30, 1996. He emphasised that with the title changing hands from Azumah Nelson, James Leija, Gabriel Ruelas, and back to Azumah Nelson, the 130-pound division's championship level had become a most difficult and exciting category in boxing. Sammy Okaitey reports that he described Leija as a hard-working boxer who 'comes to fight to win', and the champion as 'legend of legends' (*DG*, June 1, 1996, 16) and an exemplar in international boxing. He is 'one of boxing's role models', Arum added. The champion explained why he did not retire but decided to fight Leija. The deal for the fight, he stated, started immediately after he defeated Ruelas. He claimed that he had spoken to Arum about his intention to give Leija 'another chance'. Giving 'another chance' also meant expecting a handsome financial reward from a popular fight between him and the only man who had fought him a second time and won. It also meant avenging his defeat from Leija. This face-saving, 'reclamation of glory', and score-settling aspect of 'the giving another chance' overture was crucial. If that reason – to satisfy his ego – is true, then he was not only risking his title by doing Leija a favour, but he was 'egoistically' doing so at the expense of the emotions of his numerous fans, especially those in Ghana.

In the context of his decision to fight, his personal interests, apparently, got the better of him. Moreover, his personal ambition made him transcend a national concern. He nonetheless assured his agitated fans a win, declaring at a press conference: 'I have come here [USA for the fight] to prove a point that no one beats me twice.' Leija dramatically responded that he was grateful for his kind gesture but quipped that since there was no respect for anyone in the ring, he, like the titlist, was going into the fight for a victory. Unperturbedly, he debunked the champion's prediction of a first round KO as hollow, because in 1994 he had promised the world that he would retire if he lost. 'I beat him and here he is again to fight me and make predictions', Leija charged. The champion retorted: 'When he beat me I retired for



two years ... If he beats me ... I will retire for two years and come back'. Leija then cautioned:

I have never been knocked out; only once (referring to his fight with the WBO lightweight champion Oscar De La Hoya on December 15, 1995, in New York) was I stopped [in round two] ... it was the referee who stopped the fight for a cut I had. (Okaitey, *DG*, June 1, 1996, 16)

The boxers fought at the Boulder Station Hotel, Las Vegas, in a structure erected for the occasion that had a seating capacity of approximately 4 000. The champion wanted a glorious victory like the 'father' and 'son' Melbourne one. He desired 'a tutorial for his student (Leija) and his admirers', he reminisced in a personal interview on October 5, 2009. Most waiting Ghanaian fans 'thought that I was on dangerous grounds ... because Leija had beaten me once, but I had really prepared ... and was confident ... to beat Leija'.

The Minister for Youth and Sports, E.T. Mensah, and the GBA on behalf of the Ghana government and people faxed a message which stated, inter alia, that: 'Ghanaians ... have such confidence in your ability to follow up on your prophecies that we see your victory as a forgone event' ('E.T., GBA Wish Him Good Luck', *DG*, June 1, 1996, 16). Pointing out that Ghana had derived tremendous glory from him, the message continued: 'This ... will prove once again your own mighty stature among such greats like Muhammad Ali, Joe Frazier, Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Marvellous Marvin and others'. Implying that he had positively promoted the sport and profession of boxing in Ghana, and would inspire generations of sportspersons to serve 'mother Ghana', the minister, on behalf of the nation, referred to him as a 'legend in your lifetime'.

The champion, who believed that Providence was his ally, had also '... trained well and was well motivated ... to win. It was a revenge fight for me' (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009). A few Ghanaian supporters were at the ringside. The champion, who was about 37 years old, nearly succeeded in getting a KO just a few seconds before the end of the first round when 'boom!' a wild flash-like right hook hit the younger challenger's jaw and sent him to the canvas. Sensational! The bell saved him, and he bounced back for round two. Champ opened a deep cut on Leija's right eyebrow in less than two minutes into the fifth round. The eye socket was almost exposed after the cut received a blitzkrieg of more left, right and left punches. He literally nearly blinded the challenger. While Leija was spitting out his gum shield he signalled to his corner to capitulate as he started his recess. His corner men, including Joe Souza, his cut-man, and his father, urged him into round six. Referee Richard Steele sensibly stopped the fight in round six, the bloodiest. The title had been defended with a TKO! The about 227 punches that the champion landed

against 114 from Leija made the task of the judges, Angel L. Guzman, Jerry Roth and Richard James Davies, a no brainer.

The champion, possibly encouraged by Oscar De La Hoya's easy handling of Leija at the Madison Square Garden on December 15, 1995, had ambitiously predicted that in the absence of a round one KO, the fight would not exceed round three. Leija did not allow this to happen. However, Leija accepted the TKO with total equanimity. Without begrudging the referee, Leija disclosed in an interview that throughout his career so far it was his easy susceptibility to cuts that had been his 'downfall', and hoped that the 'good fighter' would offer him another rematch. Under the spotlight of the in-the-ring post-match interview with the sports section of Time Warner's Home Box Office (HBO) TV network, the champion pontificated that his God and superior fighting power had brought him victory. No boxer, he claimed, could beat him twice. He added that he had changed his mind about a round one KO because he wanted to 'punish him' (*Azumah Nelson vs Jesse James Leija III Part 3* n.d.), and KO Leija in the last rounds 'for people, [especially those who criticised that I was "old"] to know that the stamina that I have is unquestionable'.

Arum called the champion's sterling performance fantastic. 'He is getting better with age. I am going to start work immediately to get him here again in September' (Okaitey, *DG*, June 3, 1996, 1, 16.). He could not get him back in September, but his praise, like other compliments from fans that he should keep fighting, perhaps made Azumah ignore retiring, when others thought he should. Having gained the respect of Arum, the boxer fought again and again. 'I am ready to fight tomorrow or next week' (*Azumah Nelson vs Jesse James Leija III Part 3*, n.d.), he had informed the world in the post-match interview. He had taken revenge, won, and retained the title. He had promised to retire with the title. Why didn't he? Did the 'old Professor' really think that he had tenure for life? Perhaps that is what he wanted. Incidentally, when he finally retired in 1998, he meritoriously received the honorary position of a WBC Emeritus Champion for Life from the WBC.

Although the Champ was adamant that he would not leave the ring, he should have realised that he too was only human and thus – like all other mortals – subject to the law of diminishing returns and that eventually, his 'active tenure' as 'the Professor' would be short circuited, more likely by young, stamina-filled, and equally skilful title-hungry boxers. 'Beware Champ! Beware "Lion of Africa"! The younger lions are hungry and are waiting', someone should have cautioned him. With his camp and himself enjoying the addictive fame and jolly ride of victories, it seemed that no one in his entourage strongly sounded such a warning. Moreover, he had demolished ferocious fighters like Gomez, Martinez, Fenech and Leija and so, perhaps, he and his followers, subconsciously, thought he was indestructible.



Notes

- 1 He managed Don King's New York office, and negotiated contracts for Don King-promoted fights. He managed several boxers, including Azumah Nelson. He died in 1997.
- 2 Julio César Chávez boxed for over twenty-five years and won six world titles: WBC super-featherweight (1984), WBA lightweight (1987), WBC lightweight (1988), WBC super-lightweight (1989), IBF light-welterweight (1990) and WBC super-lightweight (1994). For several years, he was considered the best pound-for-pound boxer in the world.
- 3 Edwin 'El Chapo' Rosario from Puerto Rico won world titles: WBC lightweight (1983–84), WBA world lightweight (1986–87 and 1989–90), and WBA world light welterweight (1991–1992).
- 4 Sir Ishola Akay was raised in Ghana by Nigerian parents. He relocated to England in the 1970s. Several acclaimed professional boxers and world champions, including Mike Tyson, have trained in his famous gym in London. He has contributed immensely to boxing in England. He received the Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) award in 2000. (Oyedoyin, 2002).
- 5 He bears the famous credit for masterminding Daniel 'Danny' Williams' defeat of Mike Tyson in 2004.
- 6 In 2002, *The Ring* ranked Whitaker as the 10th greatest fighter of the last 80 years.
- 7 Pound for pound is a ranking in combat sports, such as boxing or mixed martial arts, that determines and describes the level of the value of a fighter's technique, skill and ability in relation to fighters of different weight groups.
- 8 For more information about Whitaker's career and fighting style see Sugar (2006, 163–166).
- 9 His voting and induction occurred in 2006 and 2007 respectively. Roberto Duran and Ricardo López were contemporaries of his.
- 10 For the full story see *PDG*, May 19, 1990, 1, 8, 9, and 15.
- 11 It is a concept and practice of West African origin. It is an aura, supernatural power or other magical property, usually associated with spirits or luck, attached to a physical object. It also refers to the rituals and craft that animate it. Benign juju offers protection, healing and good luck. Malevolent ones are used to cause misfortune.
- 12 He annexed the IBF and WBC lightweight titles and took others. After defeating Azumah Nelson, he kayoed Juan Nazario in one round to add the WBA title on August 11, 1990. He became the first undisputed lightweight champion since Roberto Duran. He took the IBF junior welterweight title from Rafael Pineda of Colombia on July 18, 1992. On March 6, 1993, he defeated James 'Buddy' McGirt to become the linear and WBC welterweight champion. He retired in 2001, with an official professional record of 40–4–1 (17 KOs.). Since then, Whitaker has intermittently been prosecuted for possessing cocaine, which has cost him a lot of his fight money.
- 13 See *Pernell Whitaker | Azumah Nelson 5/5* (n.d.).
- 14 La Porte fought Mario Miranda in a WBC match in 1982 at the Madison Square Garden for the vacant world title. Miranda quit before the start of round eleven. La Porte was

champion from September 15, 1982 to March 31 1984. He was deposed by Wilfredo Gomez.

- 15 Fenech was a world champion in IBF bantamweight, WBC super-bantamweight and WBC featherweight classes.
- 16 This was a feat which boxing greats like Sugar Ray Leonard, Thomas Hearns and Roberto Duran had accomplished.
- 17 See *Jeff Fenech vs. Azumah Nelson 1* [6/6] (n.d.).
- 18 He served as a corner-man for numerous champions, including Muhammad Ali, for whom he was also a personal physician.
- 19 See *Jeff Fenech vs. Azumah Nelson 1* [6/6] (n.d.).
- 20 See *Jeff 'Marrickville Mauler' Fenech vs Azumah 'The Professor' Nelson' 1 (part 6)* (n.d.).
- 21 See interview of Azumah Nelson in *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, (2010).
- 22 *The Ring* was established in 1922 in the US. Since the 1970s it has given the annual Upset of the Year award to a fight that according to the magazine's writers' standards produced results that highly contradicted general expectations.
- 23 *Obene* is the Akan word for indigenous chief.
- 24 *Hene* is the short form of *Obene*.
- 25 The video replay of the incident indicates that the second fall was more of a slip than from a punch.
- 26 This Ga language phrase means 'Do not hate someone'.
- 27 From records (see: *BoxRec Boxing Encyclopedia*. 2009. s.v. 'Attu Clotney') it appears that Clotney and Barnes fought for the Commonwealth welterweight title at the Sydney Stadium on November 28, 1955. They clashed again at the same venue on August 12, 1957. In both 15-round encounters, refereed by Vic Patrick, Clotney lost on points.
- 28 Ike Quartey defended the title twice and relinquished it after seizing the WBA welterweight title by kayoing the undefeated Crisanto Espana in round eleven in Levallois, France, on June 4, 1994.
- 29 An Akan word for congratulation(s).
- 30 See the interview of Azumah Nelson, in Melbourne, Australia, by award-winning TV host and boxing promoter Peter Maniatis, 2008.
- 31 His appellation changed to 'Bazooka'.



6

The beginning of the end: Retirement

Twilight: The Genaro Hernandez triumph, 1997

Azumah Nelson, the WBC super-featherweight champion, accepted a challenge and fought Genaro ‘Chicanito’ Hernandez from the USA in 1997. Would he pay a sordid price for being obstinate to the idea of retirement? Hernandez, a determined ‘younger lion’ who had waited in the tall shrubs to end the reign of the ‘Lion of Africa’, must have thought that he was aged, on the edge, and could fall with a little nudge. Could the ambitious boxer unseat ‘the Professor’ from the boxing ‘college’ of the super-featherweights and thank him for rendering effective boxing lessons in the ‘college’? Who could send him home to rest because his tenure was not for life? Could he use the 31-year-old Hernandez, a former holder of the WBA super-featherweight title, to pick up some ‘easy’ cash and smoothly cruise to retirement? After twelve rounds at the Memorial Coliseum, in Corpus Christi, Texas, on March 22, the ring announcer Dave Bontempo pronounced Hernandez the winner by a split-decision verdict from judges Alfred Asaro, Richard James Davies and Gale E. van Hoy.

During the fight Azumah Nelson appeared a little slow to recover from and/or react to attacks. Had he become a ‘shot fighter’ – a fighter with diminished reflexes and sluggish limbs? No! His brain was injury free, and he was lucky to have ‘left’ or retired from boxing before a horrible midbrain damage, harbinger of neurodegenerative diseases like *dementia pugilistica* (punch-drunk syndrome) could affect him like Muhammad Ali, Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson and others who, perhaps unfortunately, ‘over boxed’ and sustained repetitive head trauma from strong punches to the head.

Louis, within a few years, developed mental decline, although rumour claims that it stemmed from drugs. Before his death, Robinson succumbed to Alzheimer’s disease, even though old age has been adduced as the reason. The health of Ali, who in 1999 was crowned ‘Sportsman of the Century’ by *Sports Illustrated* and ‘Sports Personality of the Century’ by the BBC, rapidly progressed from boxing-induced

neurological damage to a Parkinson-like symptomatology. After retiring in 1981 he lived a docile life.

During the fight, many of Azumah Nelson's heavy KO-searching punches consistently failed to land on Hernandez because of his outfighting finesse. Consequently, one frustration-driven but delayed KO-oriented punch hit Hernandez's throat after the bell had chimed to end round seven. It was an illegal hit. Hernandez went down in pain. 'I did not do it intentionally ... I know what to do in the ring ... I am called 'the Professor'. The hitting ... was an accident and I thought I would be disqualified, but I was not', he testified later in a personal interview on October 5, 2009. Hernandez could have discontinued fighting, and perhaps the opponent would have been disqualified. A point was deducted from the hitter. After about five minutes of rest, Hernandez resumed fighting to the admiration of his opponent and applause from the crowd. He told Ed Ludwig of *East Side Boxing* in March 2006 that:

I did not want to win on a disqualification. I was controlling the fight ... to beat Azumah Nelson the way a true champion should be beat [sic] and that is by fighting.

Hernandez subdued the 'ghost' of Azumah Nelson and cruised to victory. Azumah Nelson, who was not dishonoured by a disqualification, applauded Hernandez's gallantry when the scores were announced in his favour. When the boxers were interviewed by Dave Bontempo, the new champion revealed that he had too much respect for the sport to stay down after an unintended foul (Bacharach, *Cyber Boxing Zone Journal*, May 1997). The Ghanaian boxer verbally wished Hernandez a long reign, but Hernandez jovially quipped, 'As long as you don't come back'. Symbolically placing the belt around Azumah Nelson's waist, he said: 'You came as a champion, you leave a champion', and honourably raised the Ghanaian's hand (Bacharach, *Cyber Boxing Zone Journal*, May 1997). It was an emotionally moving but admirable moment. At the 'ripe old' age of 37, Azumah Nelson did not exhibit the total boxing power he had demonstrated some years previously, yet Hernandez venerated him as someone who always brought out the best in his opponents. He was well past the age of 30, which in the category that he fought in was considered old and the age for retirement, when he brought the best out of younger boxers such as Whitaker, Leija and Hernandez. In acknowledgment of this gift, Whitaker declared that Azumah Nelson was the boxer who made him to put up his best fight since his Olympic gold medal-winning performance (Aggrey, *PDG*, May 21, 1990, 1, 15). In the same vein, Hernandez, who retired in 1998, testified to that quality when Ed Ludwig asked him in 2006: 'You gave boxing fans many action-packed fights over the years. Which one stands out as your favourite?' 'I would say Azumah Nelson', was Hernandez's reply.

Azumah Nelson, whose boxing excellence was respected by his compatriots, could



have chosen to retire as a title holder, leaving the title vacant – on a silver platter – for some other boxers to contest. But just as he sweated and wrested belts from champions, he wanted contenders to sweat for his title. Hernandez finally did that. Champ lost the title. Like empires, which rise, climax and eventually decline, boxing champions do not remain champions forever, and Azumah Nelson was no exception. However, although he lost the title, it did not deprive him of national acclaim as a great boxer.

The disastrous return: Azumah Nelson fails to grab a lightweight title in 1998

So, did he quit boxing immediately? No. He felt ‘strong’ on his feet during training because he could still manoeuvre to ‘roll’ left and right, stop, stutter steps, shuffle and ‘dance’. He could do the head swerve, dodge punches here and there, and slide to and fro. So, he planned to remain in it for maybe a year or two to satisfy his unfulfilled dream of clinching another title. Parallel to this was his obligation to his commercial ventures and nuclear and extended families, and engagements in other social activities. I return later to a detailed discussion of this aspect of his life outside of the ring.

As he lurked in the background as an ex-champion, he aimed for a title in another division to reiterate to the world that ‘I am the best. I am the Professor’, because he felt exiled and restless for being outside the centre of the super-featherweight show. He craved a ‘comeback’ and disliked the idea of quitting on a loss, but he soon learnt that a loss or retirement could not dispossess him of his national and international iconic reputation. After all, many famous boxers, including Muhammad Ali, ended their careers as ex-champions, yet they remained ‘greats’ and ‘legends’.

As he wished, he had a championship fight with Leija on July 11, 1998. Even though it showed that he was a spent force whose glory days had passed, his courage in fighting a championship bout at the age of 39 years and the skills and expertise that he exhibited in that fight constituted additional tributes to one of boxing’s enduringly successful careers created with a warrior’s mentality. With this mindset, carrying a 39-4-2 record, he combated Leija, whose record was 34-3-2, at the Alamodome, for the vacant IBA lightweight title. How did he fare in this bout, which was scheduled at the same venue with those of Tracy Harris Patterson vs Goyo Vargas, Gabriel Ruelas vs Troy Dorsey, and Miguel Angel Gonzalez vs Alexis Perez? He was beaten.

Noted for his ability to pull power-laden surprise punches, he enjoyed enduring international acclaim as a ‘surpriser’. ‘He is as awkward as Prince Naseem [Hamed]’, said Bert Randolph Sugar, the Executive Editor of *Fight Game Magazine*. ‘He throws looping punches that aren’t really seen here in America. It’s more from the European and African school. He has power, because he gets his whole body behind punches’

(Smith, *NYT*, July 11, 1998). Like featherweight arch-enemies Sandy Saddler and Willie Pep, alias Guglielmo Papaleo, who between 1948 and 1951 waged one of the most memorable four-fight rivalries in boxing history, he and Leija used this bout to settle a five-year-old score in 1998 to animate their own memorable four-fight rivalry into history. Leija believed that ‘unless something crazy happens ... Like another draw’, it would be their last fight and of course a good one. ‘We’ve had some classic battles’, said Leija. ‘I don’t expect the fourth to be any different’, he added (‘Alamodome fight fourth match between Leija, Nelson’, July 11, 1998).

The home support was conspicuously large for Leija, who was faster and more agile, and frequently punched on target. Although the older boxer was sluggish and fractured his left hand in round five (Roberts and Skutt 2006, 531), he went the full distance in the fight which was refereed by Laurence Cole. Nonetheless, it was no wonder judges Gale E. van Hoy, Gary Merritt and Harold Lederman scored in Leija’s favour. Many die-hard optimistic fans in Ghana, especially in Ga-Mashie, were disappointed. Afterwards, there was no need for a prophet or seer to counsel his psyche and body that he should retire because his best boxing days were over. He took retirement. However, his legend as one of the greats of all time did not retire. Ten years later, he engaged Fenech in an exhibition bout. Incidentally, trainer Joe Goosen, who assisted him to prepare against Leija in his gym in Van Nuys, Los Angeles, asserted that Champ maintained a unique air of boxing expertise about him until the end. ‘When I trained him, it was one of the few times I was in awe of the guy working out’, he revealed. ‘He knew every trick in the book, he had an answer to anything you could throw at him ...’, Goosen added. Moreover, ‘He really made it an art form’ (*DN*, August 18, 2003). This trainer, who coached Gabriel Ruelas in his fights against Azumah Nelson, testified that he had always admired his skills from afar. Venerating his legend, Goosen averred: ‘He’s beyond good, and there is a line of demarcation where certain guys go beyond great’. He added:

Gretzky has crossed that line in hockey, Ken Griffey, Jr., in baseball and Magic Johnson in basketball. Those are the guys who make it all look so easy. Azumah has crossed that line in boxing. He just hasn’t had the kind of exposure in this country [USA] to put him up there with them. (Smith, *NYT*, July 11, 1998)

The trainer was right about his prodigy, but not quite correct about his assertion that the boxer’s exposure in the USA was rather minimal. The boxer’s legend is globally recognised in and by the world of true followers of boxing.

Retirement and life after retirement

The retired boxer stayed in Ghana as a respected national icon. His time was spent with his family, receiving more awards, wining and dining with the rich, famous,



and/or political, managing his commercial ventures, doing social advocacy and philanthropic work, advising aspiring boxers, and attending social functions and various radio and TV sports and talk shows. This period also offered a conducive and appropriate time and space in his life to expound a strong humanitarian ideology, establish a community-centred support institute, and provide a tangible and lasting infrastructural mechanism in Ghanaian and eventually African society to assist the young and talented in developing their sports talents and academic potential. To this end, he resolved to establish a foundation and an ultra-modern sports and academic complex. Such a goal, he recounted in a personal interview on October 5, 2009, ‘... was something ... I thought of committing the rest of my active life to and achieving in the period of my retirement’. He planned to use his fame and connections, and a controversial but hyped international exhibition bout, to generate financial, material and intellectual assistance to support his big humanitarian mission.

The controversial ‘fund-raising’ fight with Jeff Fenech, 2008

In pursuit of finding funds for his project, which he placed under his Azumah Nelson Foundation, he verbally solicited the charity of the WBC, the GBA, notable boxers, international and local corporate bodies, politicians and other philanthropists. In addition, he arranged a fundraising bout with the retired boxer Jeff Fenech. Incidentally, before he retired, Fenech, whose chin seemed to have totally gone, was ‘blown out’ in two rounds in an IBF lightweight title contest by the South African Philip Holiday, on May 18, 1996, in The Glasshouse, in Melbourne. The two retirees agreed to stage a ‘return’, i.e. fundraising, match. The fight occurred during the sixteenth year after their second engagement in 1992. This case of ‘two aged businessmen’ participating in a gimmicky event elicited ambivalent reactions from boxing enthusiasts in their respective countries. It attracted a certain strange curiosity from the general world of boxing, mainly because its inherent nature was apparently weird, if not laughable and pathetic. While some minds deemed it thrilling and good for the records of ‘one-time world-class’ boxers, others viewed it as unethical and extremely dangerous. The outcome could be fatal. After complaining that ‘Boxing matches, whose primary aim is to render your opponent unconscious by belting them about the head, are very dangerous’ (*Herald Sun*, June 19, 2008), Douglas Travis, president of the Victoria chapter of the anti-boxing Australian Medical Association (AMA), denounced the fight, which the organisers had labelled as ‘The Final Round’. The GBA also dissociated itself from the fight. Its chairman, Moses Foh Amoaning, did not deem it an exhibition bout because the two opponents had signed contracts. The authority therefore deemed it a ‘serious’ competitive and commercial

affair, which posed a health risk to the two 'aged' boxers ('GBA Outlaws Azumah vs Fenech', June 24, 2008). Meanwhile, Azumah Nelson declared: 'He's (Fenech) got a big mouth ... a big punch, but I have a bigger punch ... to knock him out' ('I'm Going to Flatten Fenech: Nelson', *Jeff Fenech vs Azumah Nelson 3*, June 25, 2008). Barry McGuigan, another International Boxing Hall of Fame member, lamented to the London *Daily Mirror* that: 'This contest will prove nothing, other than that one old man is better than another ... This is ridiculously silly on a number of fronts, but first and foremost it's dangerous' (Borges, *The Sweet Science*, June 23, 2008). Some concerned boxing experts in Australia and Ghana, reportedly, labelled the decision of the fighters as 'mad' ('GBA Outlaws Azumah vrs [sic] Fenech', June 23, 2008). The 'boxers', who apparently were declared fit by ring doctor Peter Lewis, ignored the criticisms. Azumah Nelson felt it was a noble cause. 'I told you that Jesus Christ was sacrificed for us ... We also have to sacrifice for others at times', he disclosed later (pers., comm., October 5, 2009). However, apart from his articulated benign intentions, the thought that the fight would further illuminate his legend and fame inspired him. He deemed the fight safe. 'I'm too tough to get hit ... A champion is always a champion. This is not killing, this is boxing. That's why the referees are there', he told the *Herald Sun* in June, 2008 ('Australian Doctors Call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight', *Herald Sun*, June 19, 2008).

Apart from charity, Fenech saw the bout as an opportunity for a sweet revenge – *La Revancha* – on his nemesis of the 1991 and 1992 bouts. 'I just want to prove ... that I can beat Azumah Nelson ... I beat him the first time (1991) and got robbed, but if I had not ... thought I was invincible I could have won the second time', he said ('Australian Doctors Call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight', *Herald Sun*, June 19, 2008). To the raging criticisms, he surprisingly admitted that, in his youth, he would have defined the fight as a stupid venture between two 'forty something'-year-old retirees and adventurers, and supported a prohibition of it; however, he felt different about it at 44 years old. Claiming he would not support a fight between two unfit boxers, he confirmed that they were fit. 'I would never have thought a 44-year-old could be this fit. In a way, I would say I am crazy now [for agreeing to box]', he added. Dismissing warnings that the fight could be fatal, he opined: 'I'm not out to kill anyone [in the fight], but if that happens, that's life, if I die, it would be doing what I love'. To the anti-boxing position of the AMA, Azumah Nelson argued that: 'They are the medical people and we are boxers ... This is our game, this [is] what we know. When you come into this world, God gives you something, God gives you a profession. Boxing is my profession' ('I'm Going to Flatten Fenech: Nelson', *Jeff Fenech vs Azumah Nelson 3*, June 25, 2008).

Weighing approximately 152 pounds, he duelled with Fenech, who weighed about 151 pounds, at the Hisense Arena (The Melbourne Park Multi-Purpose



Venue) in Melbourne on June 24. The referee was Malcolm Bulner. In opposition to the position of the AMA, Bernie Balmer, chairman of the Professional Boxing and Combat Sport Board (PBCSB) in Victoria, remarked that the Board 'did not oppose the fight and accused the medical association of jumping in for publicity' ('Australian Doctors Call for Ban of Azumah, Fenech Fight', *Herald Sun*, June 19, 2008). The well-known Melbourne barrister Bernie Balmer, whose responsibilities included making sure that fighters did not risk their health, added, 'They [the two boxers] have both been passed as fighting fit, so we [the PBCSB] have no problem with two middle-aged blokes jumping into a ring and having a go ... Both guys are skilled and world champions'. Apart from the PBCSB, some influential persons such as Shane Warne, a former cricket great, and Domenic 'Mick' Gatto, alias The Don,¹ supported the organisation of the 'The Final Round' fight (Paxinos, *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 13, 2008; *Boxingcraft.com*, May 3, 2008). Gatto, it is said, provided the gym in which Fenech trained. Both boxers did train hard, but their sluggishness was noticeable in the bout, which organisers had ironically declared as a restorer of 'professional boxing's tarnished reputation'. The proverbial rage and brawling spirit of 'the Marrickville Mauler' was missing and the zooming speed and strong punches of his opponent were visibly absent. Catcalls from some disappointed and bored spectators who had paid thousands of Australian dollars for a ringside seat reverberated in the approximately 11 000 seat arena, which was only about two-thirds full. Among the sparse crowd gathered to 'see two old geezers slug it out in the ring' were some notables and sports celebrities ('How the Australian Press Reported the Azumah vrs [sic] Fenech Fight', *The Age*, June 25, 2008). These included Shane Warne, rugby league player Wendell Sailor, Australian Football League (AFL) stars Rene Kink, Brendon Fevola, Matthew Richardson and Matthew Lloyd, and businessman, Domenic 'Mick' Gatto.

Although the fight was televised live on some TV networks in Ghana, it did not whip up a lot of popular attention and interest in the country because of its seeming nature as a personal and commercial publicity stunt and its lack of support from the GBA. The first eight rounds were slow. In corners, they stiffly exchanged some not-too-fluid punches and profusely clinched and 'shoulder-wrestled' to tactically save stamina. This sensible strategy was not exactly scintillating for most of the eager spectators. No wonder the largest cheers of the night went to the spectacular bikini-wearing dame who held the number cards up between rounds.

Fenech did a lot of evasive 'running' and 'dancing' around in the last two rounds. This 'dancing rehearsal' attracted some boos from the sparse crowd. He later told Fox Sports, an Australian group of sports channels, that his ribs ached from a big strike so he used those tactics to evade any late injury. 'I know it was not the old Jeff Fenech, but hopefully it was smarter', he said defensively. 'I had to make sure I

got protected as much as I could ... Azumah Nelson is a great, great warrior...’, he added. Judges Andrew Campbell, Aneeka Williams and Ignatius Missailidis scored the fight. Fenech was glad to have won by a majority decision (MD) and iterated to the crowd that that little win was an honour. ‘The fight is supposed to be draw ... but you kno’ it is in his country...’, Azumah Nelson lamented (*Azumah Nelson vs Jeff Fenech III* (6/6) *Full Fight Excellent Quality*, n.d.).

Commenting on the seriousness or otherwise of the bout between the two ‘golden oldies’, *The Age* of June 25 sarcastically wrote: ‘It [the fight] had been a circus all night, and as these two distinguished gentlemen climbed out of the ring, it was hard to know if they were strongmen, lion tamers, or just clowns’. Nevertheless, the fight was important to the boxers. Fenech naturally gained some emotional and psychological satisfaction from ‘beating’ his nemesis. The loser, too, was at least satisfied that the fundraiser intended for his charitable agenda had happened. However, he subsequently angrily threatened legal action if he did not receive his fair share of the money from the event from the Australian side. During a visit to Australia in October 2008, when he attended a ceremony of the Australian National Boxing Hall, it was reported that he claimed that Fenech and one of Sydney’s managers Max Markson and the Australian group whom he collaborated with to put together ‘The Final Round’ owed him over \$500 000 (Anderson, *Herald Sun*, October 14, 2008). Lamenting that the Australian side was denying him his bona fide financial reward, he told the *Herald Sun* that he could have ‘knocked Fenech out whenever he wanted’. What mattered to him was the financial aspect of the arrangement, which was not for his personal use but for God, charity and the good of under-privileged children and humanity. ‘I deal with God directly. Nobody does something to me and go free. He (Fenech) is going to put himself in a big problem’ he cautioned. ‘Big trouble. God will become annoyed with him, then his children will suffer ... Today you think you are free but tomorrow you are not’ (Anderson, *Fox Sports*, October 15, 2008).

The Australian side, however, refuted his allegations. According to Jon Anderson in the *Herald Sun* (October 15, 2008), Fenech admonished Azumah Nelson to be satisfied with the about \$272 000 that he had been paid. He stated that: ‘Azumah should be over the moon with what he’s got, which is more than I ended up with ...’. Moreover, ‘We both hoped to make more money and our expectations were high but it didn’t turn out that way’. He later explained that when they first agreed to fight, he had thought, ‘“who is going to come and watch us?” I’m a critic of old boxers coming back, but once we agreed to it, I made sure it was done properly’. According to him the about 23 000 homes that paid to view the fight on TV fell far short of what the fighters and promoter Max Markson had envisaged. ‘Yes, it was his (Markson’s) first fight promotion, but he worked his arse off’. Markson ‘was brilliant with the publicity’, Fenech declared. Refuting allegations that he and Markson had stashed



away Azumah Nelson's share, Fenech told the press in October 2008, 'If anyone wants to check my bank accounts, go ahead. There isn't any secret stash'. He explained that a lot of complimentary tickets were given out but if not for Mick Gatto, who sold a whole lot of tables, the money accrued would have been a lot less. Markson revealed that the scanty ticket sales and PPV figures affected the fees for the boxers. Nevertheless, Fenech contended that Markson paid them well. 'Where else would we (40-plus year-old boxers) get paid that money as fighters?' 'Maybe Azumah has been getting some bad advice. Maybe he has been listening to the wrong people', he reportedly added (Anderson, *Fox Sports*. October 15, 2008).

Claiming that he had promised Fenech's family he wouldn't 'hurt him' in any way, Azumah Nelson registered discontent, implying that his Australian 'partners' had been dishonest and betrayed his trust, a trust which had made him lenient in the ring. 'But if I know [sic] before the fight that some people tell lies, then I would have knocked him out', he said. 'I tried to fight him like I was sparring, because he don't know how to box. First fight, second fight, third fight ... just walk up going bang, bang, bang ... After the fifth round he was puffing ... so tired I had to hold him up' (Anderson, *Herald Sun*, October 14, 2008). The Australian camp disclosed its readiness to sit down with him to discuss and remove the post-match financial disagreement and 'cold' relationship that had emanated from one of the most controversial post-retirement boxing spectacles in boxing history. The two old boxers may or may not have appealed and appeared to the world of boxing as 'mad men', 'strongmen', 'bored businessmen', 'cash hunters', 'lion tamers', or 'clowns'; what is true is simply that they were fierce and skilful boxing 'gladiators' in the category of champions during their prime.

Reviewing the boxing brilliance of Azumah Nelson

The boxing genius of Azumah Nelson was unquestionable. His record in active professional and title-oriented boxing, which formally ended in 1998, testifies to that fact. In that epoch of victories, largely embellished by numerous KOs, against some of the most hard-to-break local and international contenders, he displayed quality, and gained recognition in world sports as a fierce, globetrotting boxer and champion with amazing strength, flawless dedication, incredible courage and inspiring discipline. He possessed the ideal qualities of a celebrated national and continental hero of sports, boxing and popular culture. His spirit was young and witty, stylish and entertaining, risk-taking and stubborn, tactical and spiritual, and he was proud of his modest Ghanaian and African origins.

Although he can be ranked with other notables from Africa such as Marcellin 'Le Bombardier Marocain' Cerdan, the French *pied noir* who learned his boxing

craft in Africa (Algeria and Morocco), Roy Ankrah, Hogan 'Kid' Bassey, Dick Tiger, Cornelius Boza Edwards² and D.K. Poison, he is indubitably acknowledged extensively by boxing fans and critics, including José Sulaiman, as the greatest of the fistic sportsmen ever to come out of Ghana and Africa. He has received high awards from his country to celebrate his contribution to national growth, the uppermost being the Order of the Volta.

What about his place on the international scene? No difficulty! He was simply remarkable within the feather/super-featherweight division(s) where he ultimately operated. While 'the oldies' or 'old-old timers' like Willie Pep, Sandy Saddler and Eusibio Pedroza were all good, an inspection of the quality of his opponents and the speed associated with the fights of his time suggests that the fights of those older legends were slow-paced and could not match the fights of his era. Salvador 'Chava' Sanchez, his contemporary, regarded Champ as a fistic genius. With a TKO he stopped the Ghanaian's first but overhasty attempt at a world title, and the latter never stopped revering him for that. However, being fond of saying, 'Nobody beats me twice', he has always regretted Sanchez's early death because it made it impossible for him to avenge his defeat. Nevertheless, after Sanchez's demise, he established himself as the indisputable best in the world in the featherweight and super-featherweight divisions. It is impossible to ascertain for sure whether Sanchez ever reached his peak or whether he might have reached the zenith that Azumah Nelson attained. Azumah Nelson reached his peak and his record supports an excellent career of boxing greatness. For dominating the two international lower divisions by beating the rest of the greats of his time for about a decade and a half, the renowned boxing connoisseur Bob Arum admirably called him the 'legend of legends' (Okaitey, *DG*, June 1, 1996, 16).

As the years flew by and generations of international, African and Ghanaian boxing lovers and aficionados grew and evolved, the name 'Azumah Nelson' was (and has been), synonymous with 'champion'. His preserved legend, ring excellence and international fame catapulted him into the list of nominees for the International Boxing Hall of Fame on January 8, 2004. As a pioneer continental African to be selected to that hall, he was inducted on June 13, 2004. For his discipline, and contribution to society through sports, this boxing prodigy also received other prestigious international awards, some of which will feature in the discussion in the next chapter.

So, how did this multi-nicknamed boxing gem manage to acquire such an admirable record of great victories, attain a long and durable tenure as champion, and enjoy a career of superb boxing? What was the secret(s) of the finesse that brought him wide fame? Every professional boxer and potential occupational boxer nurtures the idea and hope of success. They anticipate more victories, an enduring reign as



champions, and celebrity. Hence, within the fundamental occupational universe and career culture of boxing, they construct, live, play out and internalise a *Weltanschauung* of certain conducts, predetermined roles, wishes, imagination, practices, notions and ideologies as a device for their survival and accomplishment. This motivates and assists their career within and outside the ring.

Normally at the genesis of a boxing career, a devout boxer internalises the notion of exercise and participates in the ritual of training in a bid to improve his/her physical condition, acquire and hone winning skills, and avert needless injuries. Training is deemed primary to success. When he/she advances, for example as a champion, and attracts promoters and the crowd, he/she assigns a particular period for training prior to bouts. Victory is fundamentally imperative for the vocation of all occupational boxers and therefore strategies must be contrived and self-assurance established before and during a bout to ensure it. Unpredictable is the career journey of boxing. Ups and downs typify it and bouts are erratic. Hence, occupational boxers, often in connivance with their managers and/or coaches, usually possess or formulate superstition to fashion poise, emotional composure and security for themselves in their career. Some may believe that winning comes by eating certain strength-giving foods and avoiding the touch and stare of women filled with 'bad luck' when preparing and training for an imminent bout. Aligned with this outlook, others may store 'magical' talismans and charms such as amulets and 'holy' documents like Bibles or Korans in their wardrobes or take along into the ring, for good luck, an ornament that they wore when they won their first fight. In consonance with this mind-set, many intensify their religious or spiritual outlook and kneel in the ring to say a prayer before fighting. Thus, superstitions and certain beliefs form an important and functional part of the career culture of occupational boxers, which naturally compels them to grow reliant and vulnerable and can easily thrust them into a precariously balanced physical and emotional situation of hope and anticipation, restlessness and apprehension. However, superstitions, coupled with optimistic support from fans and the technical team, consciously or unconsciously help to bolster the confidence of both champions and aspirants.

Career boxers naturally regard their bodies, especially their hands, as their main equipment-of-trade that must be protected and developed. How? They habitually invent and/or seek assistance and rely on varied formulas in the form of recipes, panaceas and exercises to prevent swellings, fractures, excessive pain to the hand and other injuries. Moreover, in aspiring for greater strides in their profession, they focus upon building and/or enhancing their confidence. This features their involvement in a scheme of relationships and traditions. Fundamentally, many draw inspiration and lessons from the fighting feats, styles, and modes of training and personality of past and present outstanding boxers. They may keep pictures and sculptured

images of their icons in their work and private spaces or on their bodies as tattoos or pendants. Others may keep some personal effects, such as trunks or socks, of their role models. Such visual images remind and assure them that they can become like or are like their role models. Others even take the names of their idols for confidence. Idolatrous and/or false as such customs may appear to the realistically minded, to the idealist, they are psychologically functional to their adherents and practitioners when occupying the shoes or gloves or taking the role and persona of another celebrated and venerated career fighter.

Additionally, accomplished or aspiring boxers may practise spiritual exercises such as yoga, while those who believe in Providence, visit spiritual experts like clairvoyants and clairsentients for predictions about fights, and/or through arcane spiritual techniques manipulate fights in their favour. Others may only stick to physical exercises, avoid habits like smoking and drinking of intoxicants, and/or periodically fast and/or seek out potions, vitamins and balms to condition and fortify their bodies, and acquire attentiveness, effective punches, and general success. They often centre themselves in their pugilistic universe because these single distinct contestants are compelled by the gladiatorial character of boxing to harbour a definite feeling and degree of self-centredness. They become expectant of occupational advancement, victories, celebrity status and social recognition. Consequently, on that trajectory they employ another 'secret' technique. They develop a spirit of determination, rely on a persevering 'fighting heart' and courage, and internalise the principal optimistic notions of 'never admit defeat', 'never be afraid of the opponent', and always 'keep your eyes on the big prize'. Adhering to these techniques issues a lingering hope that their determination and exhibited courage will ultimately convey them to their goals. This was true in Azumah Nelson's case. 'Determination was the major key for my successful career', he recounted. As a child and adolescent, he internalised a determination to succeed in every endeavour of work and become a source of economic redemption for a concentric circle of persons. He grew confident. He took this into boxing, in all the stages he traversed. Through his 'sweet' victories and knowledge about the glory of other boxing idols and legends, he understood that the position and label of 'champion' was a bringer of recognition to athletes. Moreover, an athlete's acquisition, protection and domination of such a position for a long time were sure ways of guaranteeing an enduring period of acknowledgment, fame and an excellent career in sports, especially in his field – boxing.

The teensy taste of local publicity and stimulating 'wine' of stardom in Ga-Mashie, Ghana, and Africa as a whole, during his heyday as an amateur, gave him insight into the 'grand' glory embedded in boxing prominence at the professional level. He naturally craved and envisioned such surpassing magnificence. His eminence was elevated when he became African and Commonwealth champion. He intuitively



understood the obvious boons of stardom, and confidently felt that he could and should become a globally recognised star and 'millionaire' champion with an enduring legend. Thus, when the opportune 'lucky break' to compete against Sanchez came, he fought intrepidly with a determined spirit and firm physique. He failed to get a title then, but the world of boxing recognised him and eagerly waited to witness him compete again. Under the auspices of Don King and Ringcraft, and backed by popular support from Ghana, he used another timely fight against Wilfredo Gomez to ultimately clinch the title. Thenceforth, he maintained a stronger 'yes-I-can', 'go-for-glory', and 'never-say-die' psyche. These he practically translated into 'I-am-born-to-be-a-champion', and the idealistic 'I-will-be-a-champion-forever' mental outlook which, serving as psychological stimulants, encouraged him to persevere and maintain his position as champion and a superb boxer throughout his active and difficult boxing career. Incidentally, the career that birthed his stardom was not easy because, as he confessed in a personal interview on October 5, 2009 that:

The painful body bruises (hematomas), facial cuts (abrasions) and swellings (contusions), and, sometimes, the inadequate financial rewards, and ... homesick (nostalgia) ... when ... overseas, at times, were frustrating and discouraging. However, my desire to secure my future [financially], [the anticipation] for victories ... at the end of such difficult undertakings, and determination to bring fame and honour to myself and country, which brought me [priceless] happiness, kept me going in a career ... filled with tension, physical punishment and tiredness (fatigue).

Apart from determination, he nurtured and developed other personal qualities and perceptions that played their role in his success. He called them 'life skills'; they could make a person succeed or fail in sports, business or education. Within the scheme of such life skills was the principle of adequate preparation before fights, which included hard work, a disciplined life of training, respect for one's opponent(s), and recognition of one's own strengths and the weakness(es) of opponents. 'If you step into a ring without having done the training you are likely to fail dramatically, so too [in] life' (Telfer and Nelson 2009, i). Moreover, 'You have to work hard in training. For me it was ... most of the time difficult, but I knew that success was impossible without that', he added in a personal interview (October 5, 2009). '[So] over the years and throughout my career as a professional boxer, I have come to realize that lazy people can't be successful in any arena of life' (Telfer and Nelson 2009, 2). He recalled: 'Preparing well for a fight, through adequate psychological, spiritual and physical training, and ensuring that I was thoroughly fit, was a primary factor for my success' (pers., comm., October 5, 2009)

He also deemed teamwork crucial in life. So, in the context of boxing, he held the conviction that without a team – comprising a manager, promoter, coach,

trainer, corner persons and family – there would be no boxer or winner. Therefore, he respected his team and its guidance, and relied on it for positive and cheerful support, which had a progressive impact on his career. Furthermore, the ever-present backing from his fans in Ga-Mashie and ultimately the Ghanaian nation in general greatly boosted him and his boxing performance. He was conscious that his victories brought happiness and honour to his fans, country and continent. Conversely, he knew that defeat, laziness and any misdemeanour on his part would, naturally, bring sadness, shame, disappointment and disgrace to those that his personal and professional worlds inspired. He was a boxer-cum-inspirer. Ultimately, he achieved his victories to satisfy his fandom. He thus became keenly conscious of them and of being a worthy national and African ambassador. This consciousness and the enduring support from his fans and the Ghana government compelled him to give his best during fights and, in life outside the ring, abstain from tarnishing his image, diminishing his strength and shaming his country through lifestyles such as laziness, complacency, match fixing, drug use, smoking and excessive consumption of alcohol. He stated in a personal interview: ‘Sure, without my team and encouragement from the support ... from my fans ... the people and government of Ghana ... I would not have been successful’. In addition, ‘my desire to make my fans happy and ultimately myself proud, gave me ... an effective secret weapon – a sharp focus – in the ring during fights’. On the boons of focus, he divulged that:

During training, I stay focused on the practice routine. In the ring ... on my opponent(s) ... My mind cannot wander; it must always be on the assignment at hand. I do not think about the crowd, I think about my performance all the time. (Telfer and Nelson 2009, 8)

He shut his mind to the crowd because, ‘I could easily get distracted by the cheering and roaring of the crowd, but that will have a negative effect on my performance’. Accordingly, adherence to a sharp concentration in the ring contributed to many victories, which marked success in his chosen career and quest for fame. ‘My reason for entering rings of fight was one thing: success. That was the big picture I always carried in mind from my days as an amateur through my days as a professional’ (Telfer and Nelson 2009, 8). Time management, he confirmed, was also vital to him. ‘My ability to manage time ... was very crucial in my success. A boxer, like any other professional, who does not manage ... time very well will not succeed.’ He related in a personal interview in 2010 that his harsh childhood and youth inculcated in him the habit of effective time management. He managed his time productively to do household chores, odd jobs, box as an amateur, and communicate with family and friends. ‘I did not ignore that quality and habit as I progressed in boxing.’ Moreover, ‘In boxing there is time to train, a time to rest, and a time to compete.’



In addition, 'Time management is important and should be adhered to even within boxing itself ... winning a round, or ultimately the match, depends on two things, good performance and time management' (Telfer and Nelson 2009, 5). Clearly, he combined the two very well in his superb career and long reign as a brilliant champion boxer. He claimed that:

I divided my time well and prioritised my daily activities. So I did not waste time chatting and partying at the expense of my ... fights. ... I stuck to a timetable ... to do [social] work, be with family and friends, and train and prepare for fights. This kept me [psychologically] balanced and [stress] free ... contributed to the [successful] career I had, and ... able to stick to (perform) ... social and familial responsibilities on time. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

Apart from benefitting from his sense of Ghanaian and African patriotism, ambition for honour, 'skills of life', and the gift of national support, the construction and consolidation of his long tenure of boxing greatness was gained from his customary adherence to the sport's rules and cultivation of the skill-centred ability to often issue accurate powerful punches.

Furthermore, he believed that his enduring strong Christian faith in God was indispensable to his famous career and accomplishments. It shaped in him a strong mental fortitude and confidence, which supported his idealistic conviction that success was his destiny in his chosen career. Faith-based convictions evolve through diverse means. People's belief in animate and inanimate things, concepts, chance, science and ideologies inspire faith. For many people, faith is vital for success and forms the reason and need to live or even die. People can perform extraordinary, amazing, even paranormal feats through it. Faith can 'push' people to do things far beyond their nature-given capabilities. For example, some may succeed in walking barefoot on hot coals without getting burnt. Some, in the name of faith, rebel against the status quo without the fear of suffering unfavourable consequences. Clearly, Muhammad Ali's faith in the Nation of Islam encouraged him to challenge the USA government and its Vietnam War policies. It cost him his title, but faith made him resolute and ultimately triumph over the government's persecution antics against him. It was a factor in his fame as a national icon and boxing legend. A lazy boxer he was not, yet he 'believed' that Allah and Elijah Muhammad had a supernatural influence in his success, hence his unwavering loyalty to his religious cause and course. The British boxer, Prince Naseem Hamed, who used to be a world bantamweight and featherweight champion, during interviews often articulated his loyalty to Islam, belief in the Prophet Muhammad and dependence on Allah, because his faith dictated to him that his actions, including fights, were divinely guided.

Ever since his childhood days, Azumah Nelson had believed in the miracle of prayer

and divine predestination. Therefore, at the height of his boxing career, he became a member of a Ghana-spawned Christian [Spiritual] Church – Apostles Revelation Society (ARS), founded by Prophet Charles Kobla Nutornutsi Wovenu, who ‘was followed by many adherents from every station in life’ (Amenumey 2002, 143). His fame as a ‘Man of God’ (*Mawu fe Ame*) came to national and public notice when the National Liberation Council junta that overthrew the CPP government selected him to officiate the Christian ceremony to spiritually dedicate the Christiansborg Castle as the seat of government on May 22, 1966. The Church believes in metaphysical revelations, divine guidance and prophetism. Members deem their spiritual leader, Mawu fe Ame Wovenu, as clairvoyant and clairaudient, and understand divine Providence as essential for the attainment of a successful life. The ‘Prophet’, according to Amenumey, ‘extended hospitality in the most spontaneous way to ... [people] who visited him’, and ‘people in need of spiritual help or counsel went regularly to Tadzewu, [in the Volta Region, where he was based]’. The subsequent answers to the prayers of such visitors led them to become members of his Society (Amenumey 2002, 155). Amenumey divulges that within that category of the many ‘faithful’ could be counted Azumah Nelson. Thus, as a follower of the Prophet, Azumah Nelson believed that Providence was catalytic to his success. No wonder he developed a habit of asking his supporters literally to pray for him before he fought, and a ‘custom’ of saying ‘thank you’ to God in most of his post-match interviews. ‘Divine intervention’, he has maintained, is necessary for a fulfilling life. ‘I am a strong believer ... I invite God into all things I do ... with God all things are possible’, he affirmed (Telfer and Nelson 2009, 13). In an interview in 2010 he confessed that ‘... inviting God into my affairs ... through prayers and fasting has brought me to where I am in boxing and on the international scene’. Simultaneous to this mindset, however, was his trust in physical training.

To be a successful sportsperson one must think fast, stay alert, make quick and accurate decisions, avoid drugs, live a healthy life, obey the law, learn from your mistakes, believe in yourself and never give up. I applied all these concepts in my boxing enterprise. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)

On that score, he was also a pragmatic and knowledgeable boxer who understood the power and effect of physical training on sports and athletic performances. Accentuating the necessity of physical training and effort, and life skills to success in boxing and life, he remarked:

Believing in God does not mean you should not play your human and physical part to achieve success ... ‘God helps those who help themselves’, therefore we must make sure that we have done all that is in our physical and mental power to excel. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., October 5, 2009)



Briefly, his unwavering faith in God afforded him a psychological boost and power. A review of his trade and showmanship in the ring projects him as a confident fighter whose ego was not easily deflated by irritating gesticulations and/or candle-snuffing remarks against him. Neither was he simply out-stared by opponents and their fans. A tactical self-confidence, nurtured by a purposeful mind in a healthy physique, and brilliant body movements in the ring were his allies. With a proverbial ability of not going down easily, he could simply out-manoeuvre, out-slug and out-spar opponents or absorb punishment, recuperate quickly, change his style entirely or in part, and place his opponents off-balance. These, supporting his morale, earned him many victories.

All occupational boxers and champions are typified or designated by their style and *modus operandi* in the ring. For example, Fenech was a 'mauler',³ hence his nickname 'Marrickville Mauler'. It is difficult to formulate a taxonomy for Azumah Nelson's boxing style because of his versatility. A 'tanker' or someone who went down easily he was not. He could be a 'butcher', hitting helpless opponents hard and ruthlessly, but he also possessed the qualities of a 'miller', or 'continual swinger'. He was a well-crafted and sophisticated collage of a 'puncher', 'miller', 'mauler', and an energy-saving 'boxer', who indulged in a limited number of movements. Here is an attempted description of his complex eclectic style by the famous coach, Joe Goosen:

If you saw him once, you never forgot his style ... He had a beautiful brawling style when he wanted to, one-punch knockout power, and he could put on a virtuoso boxing exhibition when he wanted to ... He could do anything. (Boxing: Best African Fighter', *DN*, August 18, 2003)

In short, he was noticeably an 'elegant' fighter and 'flexible' boxer whose shrewd manoeuvres, laced with unfettered aggression, lethal spontaneity and swift protective reflexes easily finished off opponents at crucial junctures in a fight. He could reconfigure his style by contriving unusual punches and leg actions. 'He was smart. He knew what he had to do on the spur of the moment. I don't think he even needed a game plan', was how Gabriel Ruelas once applauded his boxing virtuosity and versatility in the ring (Boxing: Best African Fighter'; *DN*, August 18, 2003).

Indeed, many students of the history of the fistic sport, within the context of Ghana and Africa, will easily submit his name as 'Number One' on the list of Ghanaian and African champion boxers who transcended and influenced the sport, became famous through it, and internationalised the African flair in and for the sport with their efforts. Actually, in the account of the emergence of renowned champions in Ghana's boxing history are pioneer titleholders such as Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison, who entered the sport and made careers, and illuminated the international scene as good boxers before Azumah Nelson. Nevertheless, the latter is better known

and more widely celebrated in Ghana and internationally than the pioneers and any other Ghanaian champion, including Nana Yaw Konadu, once his stable-mate,⁴ and Ike Quartey. The reigns of boxers such as Konadu, Quartey and Alfred Kotey compared to his were relatively short. Memory about them is therefore weak in the consciousness of the public and boxing aficionados.

For the early pioneers, whose victories first put Ghana on the global boxing map, it can be posited that, unlike Azumah Nelson, they were products of a period that did not allow them much international publicity. Ankrah, for example, operated at a time when his country Gold Coast which became Ghana was very much under British control. His visibility, which evolved from and largely took shape within a restricted and controlled political and cultural environment, was therefore ordained to be minimal on the international scene. Hence, his popularity mainly manifested itself within the periphery of the British Commonwealth's competitive boxing. D.K. Poison, who enjoyed some support from the government, was also unable to get the much-needed worldwide exposure through the media, and his tenure was also truncated abruptly. The lack of media exposure, particularly through the medium of satellite and cable television, significantly deprived him of wider global recognition, even though he was a WBC titlist.

Although these boxers are known in Ghana, their accomplishments, unlike Azumah Nelson's, are not boldly etched in the minds of many. The career and accomplishments of the latter flourished in a different political, social, economic and technological milieu. He largely operated and thrived in a situation that ultimately allowed him to undertake wider travels. This made available conditions that enabled wide media coverage which supported his professional personality, fights and accomplishments. Moreover, the situation enabled him to enjoy publicity on the international scene, and to have a resilient and vibrant environment of national acclaim, which was undoubtedly nurtured and enhanced by a long period of durable patronage from the Ghana government – the PNDC.

Apart from becoming a globetrotting champion and fighter who defeated many opponents in front of their kith and kin in their backyards and thereby acquired international repute as a courageous 'smart fighter', he was perhaps lucky to have nurtured and cultivated a professional career in an age of burgeoning electronic and even cyber-media communication. This period gave him the possibility, hitherto unthought-of or rare, of appearing easily within the expanded scope of a worldwide gaze to showcase his talent and skill. Such showcasing, through the underscored technology of communication, naturally popularised his image, skills and accomplishments and contributed to inserting his name and feats into the awareness of many followers of boxing in Ghana and abroad. His professional breakthrough emerged at a time when television technology was fast maturing and



becoming an accessible global commodity. It was an age when the multi-media of satellite and cable television, capable of showing live matches and interviews across the globe, was becoming accessible and/or had become democratised. Furthermore, the video phenomenon assisted in promoting his image and name further because it made it easy to record and disseminate his fights to the public and sports fans in his country and globally. Consequently, video helped to publicise and project his image as an eminent African boxing genius nationally and internationally. His supporters in Ghana and various parts of the world on many occasions saw him in action on screen without being physically next to the ring. Such visual gifts gave many fans first-hand insight into his fighting effectiveness, skills and victories, unsurprisingly endearing him to them. Recorded videos of his fights have immortalised him, and, serving as quick archival and reference material, they have kept his talent and internationally acclaimed genius alive. They, therefore, have continued to position him and his career as a major source and issue of popular discourse on boxing and popular culture. Consequently, most boxing enthusiasts, especially Ghanaian fans, are more knowledgeable about him and his career than they are about pioneers like Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison. For Roy Ankrah and D.K. Poison, it was only a handful of supporters, at the ringside, who saw them fight. Video recordings about them do not abound in the same way as they richly do about Azumah Nelson to remind fans about their fights and accomplishment. This is perhaps why popular recognition of them as great boxers, in the national and international milieux, has not been as strong as that of Azumah Nelson. Another explanatory factor for his acclaim is that he operated largely during the era of the PNDC, and the government supported him and promoted his image through the transmission of goodwill and congratulatory messages as he fought. His image as a national hero was thus promoted by the government, which took special interest in his fights, since his victories enhanced Ghana's international image, inspired the Ghanaian youth, and created periods of national we-feeling and unity vital to nation-building and peace. Thus media publicity and political support, his sheer showmanship and sportsmanship, boxing virtuosity, and victories, which incarnated him as a national and international boxing hero, have made him simply, by far, the greatest and most celebrated African boxer of his time. He is unsurpassed as the most adored 'pug' – boxer – among the twentieth-century Ghanaian professional boxers and champions.⁵

Notes

- 1 Domenic Gatto is an Italian-Australian former heavyweight boxer who once was a serious contender for the Australian heavyweight title (Paxinos, 2008).
- 2 Born on May 27, 1956 in Kampala, Uganda, this Ugandan boxer took the WBC world junior-lightweight title from Rafael Limón in 1981 in Stockton, California. He kayoed Bobby Chacon in his first defence bout and lost the title to Rolando Navarrete by a KO in round five.
- 3 A 'mauler' is an inside fighter who endeavours to prevail by smothering his opponents.
- 4 Stable-mates are boxers who are under the banner of one promoter or train at the same gym.
- 5 Notables of Ghana's Boxing Hall of Fame include Roy Ankrah, Floyd Klutei Robertson, Attuquaye (Atukwei) Clottey and D.K. Poison. Others are Ike Quartey, Snr, first Ghanaian Olympic Silver medallist, Rome, 1960, and Gold medallist, Perth Commonwealth Games, 1962; Eddie Blay, Olympics Bronze medallist, Tokyo, 1964, Gold medallist, Perth, 1962, and Gold medallist, Commonwealth Games, Kingston, Jamaica, 1966; Prince Amartey, Olympic Bronze medallist, Munich, 1972; Sulley Shittu, Gold medallist, Kingston, 1966, and Gold medallist, Commonwealth Games, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1970; Flash Emma, Gold medallist, Edinburgh, 1970; Raymond Narh, Gold medallist, Commonwealth Games, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1998; Adama Mensah, heavyweight Gold medallist, Africa Games, Algeria, 1978, and Stephen Dotse, light-flyweight Gold medallist, Africa Games, Cairo, 1990. Others are Ike 'Bazooka' Quartey, and Nana Yaw Konadu.



More than pain and passion: Azumah Nelson's out-of-the-ring life

In this chapter, I examine Azumah Nelson as a father, philanthropist, entrepreneur-employer, national and continental diplomat, social activist and environmentalist who has supported society in numerous ways. Society in this context is broad, and includes the different contours and concentric rings of groups of individuals like his extended and nuclear families, friends, and various Ghanaian and African youths and communities. He gives thanks to boxing, which is a sport and profession that is seen by some people as either an elevator or debaser of boxers, for elevating him to support society. To Azumah Nelson there is more to boxing than pain and passion!

The essential qualities and symbolism of modern boxing are momentous. Boxing influences several categories of human interaction (Coakley and Lever 2000, 2985), and other spheres of social life, including health. The first three chapters of this book shed some light on the roles that boxing has played in human society. Its rudimentary state as a bare-knuckled fisticuff combat, which is a type of basic human competition is natural to many human societies. In its transformed variant as gloved and refereed combat, i.e. modern boxing, it has become a globalised sporting activity with tremendous cultural, political and commercial power. However, boxing as an activity in society or topic of popular discussion elicits ambivalent opinions and attitudes. It is either appealing or disgusting, cherished or loathed, permitted or damned, and/or renders some persons apathetic. For Azumah Nelson, boxing was and is a positive sport. Fortunately, the sport, which he referred to as life – ‘boxing is my life’ – rewarded him with self-possession and acclamation instead of dispossession and obscurity. Since he retired, he has remained smart, attentive, mentally alert and fast, and worked effectively as a father, husband, boxing consultant, national icon and philanthropist. He has been helping his country and continent to approach, organically, the issue of poverty eradication by means of formal and sports education. It is this approach that

has provided the impetus for his establishment of an academy complex to educate and train talented but needy children and youth to become self-reliant. It is envisaged that this education and training will occur through formalised curricula in moral instruction, vocational education, sports training, and literacy and numeracy.

In this context, perhaps Azumah Nelson's retirement was timely. He has not exhibited symptomatic signs of punch-drunk syndrome.¹ He has not suffered the ordeal of living a boxing-induced life of pain and suffering, engineered by neurological damage and/or *dementia pugilistica*. Instead, he has been able to make a positive contribution to his community, nation and continent.

Without the gloves: A husband, father and family man

Azumah Nelson's transition from a continental amateur champion to fame as an international professional champion was most prominent from 1979 to 1984. It engineered major transformations in his personal and family life. He abandoned bachelorhood and married Beatrice Nana Tandoh. He provided a comfortable place of residence and home for himself, his mother and family. He won a world boxing title in 1984 and received fame and substantial financial rewards. Fulfilling his ambition, he purchased a house, House V. 7, at Community 9 in Tema, where he and Beatrice relocated to start a family (pers. comm., February 10, 2011). He combined the added responsibilities of husband and family member and took care of his extended family.

Sometime around 1987, the couple relocated to New Achimota, where he had completed the building of an ultra-modern mansion with a swimming pool and a gym to facilitate his boxing training. Unlike Tema, the new location was in proximity to his familiar Central Accra. The transfer also allowed him to be near to the business nerve centre of Accra and his relatives and old social contacts.

He made space in his busy schedule as a husband and champion to see his siblings and parents. He maintained a strong relationship with his younger brother Joseph, alias Sagacious, who also experimented with boxing and aspired to professional greatness, tagging along as the champion moved in pursuit of fights before and after 1984. Champ, however, was not happy with his brother's boxing ambitions. He could see that although Joseph tried hard to be a good boxer, he was just naturally unsuited to the sport. Champ therefore hoped that his close relationship with his younger sibling would help him to impart some insights about boxing techniques and tactics, and some comprehension about managerial and administrative procedures to perhaps influence him to set up a boxing school instead of taking up a professional boxing career. Consequently, Joseph gradually gave up the idea of becoming an occupational boxer. He remained very close to his brother, as one of his aides-de-camp, and this was highly rewarding. He gained some financial assistance and technical insights



into boxing techniques, coaching and administration which he utilised to establish and run the Sagacious Boxing Gym, at Adabraka, Accra, which is popular in the capital city. His success satisfied his senior brother.

As he revealed in a personal interview on February 10, 2011, Azumah Nelson remained devoted to his extended family when he started making bigger purses of Ghana cedis and US dollars from his professional and championship fights because,

I ... experienced poverty with them ... when I became big [a star], I ... ensured that ... I provided ... their basic needs and wants. I still do this.

Additionally, he cared for his nuclear family as a husband and father:

The privileges [and fortunes] that I could not get as a boy and child ... such as proper formal literacy [and numeracy] and education, I decided to give to my children ... I also decided to be a good husband.

He added,

Beatrice ... since my amateur days ... did not lose faith in me. She liked me for me at that time, [and so when I became a celebrity] ... she deserved to be happy, taken care of, and respected as my wife ...

Married and largely absorbed in a Spartan-like regimen of training, he deemed the 'allure' of womanising unrewarding. Life for the two lovebirds was enjoyable. Beatrice was well-balanced, sensitive and inspirational. 'I needed order in my life, and she provided it as a good wife'. His fame, media publicity and athletic physique made him a sought-after male specimen for many women and a sexual magnet, especially to the 'foxy ladies' in Ghana and abroad. '[M]any women were attracted to me, but ... many ... were only interested in my fame'. He, however, did not succumb to their enticing feminine blandishments. '[T]he devotion of Beatrice ... made me avoid [the temptation of] womanising [which easily comes with greatness in sports and the world of male stardom]'. He paid attention to his Beatrice, business and family. He was enamoured and committed to his naturally beautiful and statuesque wife who had a strong will and was protective of her possessions and her man. This great fan of the boxer praised her boxer-husband's victories and nursed his bruises and wounds. She occasionally accompanied him to his competitions to provide moral and matrimonial support. On occasions that her globe-trotting performer and celebrity husband was away gracing ceremonies with his presence, fighting or hunting for fights of glory, she waited patiently without offence or objection. She did not grumble when they were flooded by invitations to attend social functions. She prepared him for his flights to his tournaments. In all these she knew the boxer was doing what he had to – fight, entertain, and be available and accessible to society. Modest and culturally conscious, she became his partner in life and boxing, supporting his career

and duty to his extended family and society until her death. They had three children – David (Aruna), Dorinda and Doris.

As part of his responsibility to his family, Champ gave a facelift to his father's house. He acquired a car for his mother, as well as a house in the neighbourhood of Dansoman in Accra, a neighbourhood that pointedly had most of amenities and social infrastructure which her deprived neighbourhood of Timber Market lacked.

Over and above his familial roles and obligations, Azumah Nelson felt a need to assist the wider public. His acts of generosity and charity were immense and commendable and are spelt out in greater detail below. His life with Beatrice was satisfying; the prize money from his fights came in and so the family, which lived in a sumptuous mansion at Achimota, away from the dilapidated stretch of Jamestown, Ussher Town and Mamprobi, could meet most of its needs. Occasionally, the couple attended social functions, like receptions and parties, and were also seen at boxing matches, including some of Azumah Nelson's. Beatrice was at the ringside when he defeated Pat Cowdell (*Azumah Nelson vs. Pat Cowdell – Part 2*, n.d.). His matrimonial bliss with Beatrice was short-circuited in 1991 when cancer took her life. It disturbed his emotional, psychological and physical balance, which is indispensable for a boxing career. This nearly cost him his title to Jeff Fenech. In fact, when his wife's condition worsened, it negatively affected his mental composure and contributed to his loss against Pernell Whitaker. Thus, against Fenech, in their first fight, he battled on two fronts. Fighting the challenger was physical. Fighting the excruciating pain of losing a loved one was psychological. Divided attention and stress contributed to his mediocre performance and the draw. However, consolation from family members and friends and sympathy offered by the entire nation were therapeutic and soothing. These healed the pain but did not remove from his mind the lingering fond memories of Beatrice: strong-willed wife, mother, supporter and companion.

Beatrice's relatives and his external family, mother and sisters helped to tend and care for the young children, especially when career and social duties called, otherwise he found it an easy obligation to stay at home to bond and spend time with them. They watched movies and swam together. He drove them to and from school and, relying on his longstanding knowledge of self-grooming and cuisine, he bathed, dressed and cooked for them. As a single parent, he admirably discharged his parental responsibilities. It is said that his children are fond of those times and the chain of boxing victories their father claimed.

He ensured that they did not lack basic needs and formal academic education, and he sponsored their vacations abroad to broaden their horizons in life,

... because I [growing up] did not have such things. [I]...succeeded through boxing ... it was only sensible and natural for me to ... provide the best ... for them ... be a good father ... let them see other parts of the world and give them



the maximum support, if they wanted, and opportunity for formal education. So far, all my children ... are improving themselves [academically]. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., February 10, 2011)

He had three other children when he remarried. During the period of his widowerhood he kept many fame-seeking women out of his personal life. He was still working to get over the pain of his loss. His friends and family advised him to realign himself with another good woman as a wife. Knowing himself well, he knew that he needed a woman – a wife – a partner in life to manage his home, and mother his children, he reconditioned his psyche and opened his eyes and heart to identify one. On that search he met Peggy whose father, incidentally, was Yoofi Boham, a distinguished Ghanaian boxing manager, who mentored and managed boxers like Ike 'Bazooka' Quartey and Alfred 'Cobra' Kotey to international fame. Instinctively recognising that she had the qualities he wanted in a wife, he married her. She has remained his wife to date. She gave birth to Delise, Dalvin (Azumah Nelson, Jr) and Deloris. The couple, as the story goes, informally met some time in 1993 and interacted at one social function, a reception, at the plush Labadi Beach Hotel in Accra. In the 2011 interview (pers. comm., February 10, 2011), he recalled that his interest and admiration for the beautiful and calm Peggy, who was then working as a front desk administrator, grew after that encounter, because 'I knew that she would be my wife when I saw and conversed with her'. They saw each other again, courted for a short while, and tied the knot.

He could have led a hedonistic lifestyle woven into the tapestry of sexual promiscuity and pelvic adventurism when he was a lonely widower, but that was a way of life he did not fancy. He rather wedded Peggy and started a family with her.

Peggy was no stranger to the world, life or the sport of boxing because of her connection to Yoofi Boham. She was aware of the rigorous training schedules of professional boxers and the bruises and injuries that would need nursing. She knew the inevitability of travelling to fight, which meant that her husband would occasionally not be home. Unbothered by this, she provided tremendous moral support to her husband as he trained, travelled and fought. She resigned from her work and dedicated herself to the vocation of managing their home and taking care of the children. She assisted his quest to invest in society through his numerous charitable activities. She utilised her professional experience and knowledge in catering and hospitality management to support him in his business ventures: running a tertiary students' hostel in Accra and managing their two restaurants – Foodies Restaurant – around Tudu and in Osu RE, in Accra. She has remained a helpful partner of this wealthy boxing legend and open-handed Ghanaian. Why open-handed?

Having found fame and wealth, Azumah Nelson lived up to his plan to

philanthropically assist the needy in society whenever he could. His prowess in sports is well known, but it is his activities in the realm of kindness, respect for all persons, and generous acts of giving gifts – anonymous and open – to the disadvantaged in society, such as investing financially in society and providing outlets for those in need of jobs, that solidify and sustain his legend. Such humane gestures and pro-social activities have consolidated his status as a key figure. These qualities make him and his boxing career meaningful and relevant to and in society. They have projected him as a venerable sportsperson and made his occupation an agency for social growth in Ghana.

He believed that the ultimate method of sustaining one's charitable deeds is to provide outlets and facilities for the needy to learn how to help themselves. He comprehended the metaphor that the needy should not be given 'fish' all the time, but should be taught how to 'fish'. Hence, he planned to use part of his prize money to set up businesses to create employment in Ghana. He continued this even in his retirement.

His daily life as a national hero, especially during his days as an active boxer, was characterised by commendable small tokens of affection. He would occasionally stop, while driving any of his fine cars, in neighbourhoods, especially deprived ones in Accra, and exchange pleasantries with fans. He would converse in such situations with various elders and youths and whenever any clearly showed a need for financial assistance, he did his best to help. Such donations often helped to pay a debt and/or school fees, or bought food and/or medicine. He was fond of hugging aged fans – his old 'fathers' and 'mothers' – to show affection, and occasionally shadow boxed with aspiring and 'wannabe' boxers to inspire them.

Outside the ring: A social activist and idol

Azumah Nelson was a national hero, but he was also a man of the people. His accomplishments in the ring during his active days were used, in some cases, as lessons of instruction to quicken industriousness and dedication in Ghanaian youth. For example, Frank Mensah (*GS*, March 3–9, 1992, 4) writes that R.F.G. Akilagpa Sawyerr, Vice Chancellor of the University of Ghana, Legon, invited him to the University in November 1985 to congratulate him on his accomplishments in boxing. Using the boxer's person and life as teaching aids, the university professor implored Ghanaian students and youth to emulate his humility, dedication and self-discipline to enable Ghana to achieve good results in all fields. The academic counselled that 'Azumah's feat in his chosen field should spur you on to achieve excellence in your academic pursuit, for the champion always backed his utterances with action, which is worthy of emulation by all Ghanaians'.



His philanthropy towards needy children, especially orphans, and his ambassadorial role and heroic contribution to Ghanaian sports elicited social acknowledgement locally, and homage and awards of recognition internationally. He donated to several charitable homes for the aged, the derelict and the sick, because his career had positively reshaped his financial situation. His kind acts were part of his pursuit to bring desirable socioeconomic transformation to the lives of people and communities. Boxing negotiated a better way of life for him. Its rigorous training and demand of dedication, fortitude and integrity worked on his character and strengthened his discipline and honour. His exemplary and iconic life is an inspiration to many of the youth in Africa, especially Ghana.

Ghana was his stable base of residence during his active professional boxing days. Oko Kwatekwei (*Nelson: Ghana. Out of Africa*, n.d.) relates that, in search of more money in foreign currency, he mostly fought outside Ghana. He could have permanently stayed and pumped much of his earnings into the bigger economies of the USA and Europe, but he patriotically chose to be with his family and nation and invested in commercial and economic enterprises in his country. He has maintained this residential and business pattern. Entrepreneurially astute, he saw his investments as alternative sources of income and providers of financial security for his retirement. Such ventures supported the national economy because they employed labour and expertise and thus became sources of job opportunities. He went into businesses such as farming, animal husbandry, production of ceramic tiles and bricks and cookware, teak cultivation, and the operation of restaurants and a students' hostel for polytechnic students in Accra. He imported vegetable cooking oil and alcoholic beverages, manufactured liquor, and experimented with transportation and oceanic boat fishing. In an interview on February 10, 2011, he revealed:

[the establishments] were [basically] created with money I made through boxing ... to give back ... to society ... [and] help ... to support my future, because I knew that I will not remain in boxing and make money from it forever. I established the businesses for society and myself.

Commenting on their socioeconomic relevance, he stated that

... [t]hey provided ... services and products for ... the country ... employment and financial security for ... people, especially the unemployed youth, [and therefore contributed to the nation's drive towards the alleviation of poverty in the country].

His iconic image also sold. Typical of legendary sportspersons like the basketball legend Michael Jordan and golf legend Tiger Woods who derived financial sponsorship from companies such as *Nike* for using their images to advertise their products, he made commercial gains from advertising in newspapers and on TV

and signboards for companies. He advertised a painkiller tablet for a Ghanaian pharmaceutical company and footwear for Lennards Ghana Limited. Subliminally, such adverts also amplified his popular and familiar heroic image in the public's psyche. Beside stardom, his business activities attracted the friendship and company of some of the movers and shakers of Ghana's corporate world, such as Mr Bamfo alias Sikkens, of Bamson Company Limited, the representative of Sikkens Car Paint in Ghana,² and George Adu Bonsu, alias Benjillo, of Benjillo Fabrics Company in Ghana, who was later implicated for transacting narcotics and jailed in 1997.

Although he associated with such high-class persons, and acquired nice cars, including an expensive and chauffeur-driven Lincoln Stretch Limousine not common in Ghana, he also unashamedly mingled with struggling and ordinary people. He hoped his luxuries would give them hope and inspiration to strive unceasingly and diligently towards their goals. In the 2011 interview, he explained:

I bought the Lincoln ... to reward myself for all my hard work. But most importantly I wanted to use my image and person in the car ... [on] the streets and roads in the country, to inspire other underprivileged elements and ... youth of the ghetto ... and the Ghanaian youth [in general].

In this, he hoped to imply that, if 'I had made it in life they could make it too ... with the right mental condition and attitude, and hard work, they could also be successful in their [respective] fields of endeavours'.

Frank Mensah (*GS*, March 24–30, 1992, 3) reports that his financial help and material gifts of generosity and donations to psychiatric and social institutions for the abandoned, and orphanages such as Osu Children's Home, Dzorwulu Children's Home and Tema SOS Village, and Akropong School for the Blind strengthened his ties with the public. The assistance and connection enlivened many disadvantaged. Intermittently, he donated gifts such as sports items, for instance uniforms and balls, and cash to some amateur sports clubs, and keep-fit gymnastic and aerobic clubs in Accra. His outside-the-ring edifying life of generosity and commitment to youth empowerment and honour travelled into his retirement and has not halted.

His legend, heroism and recognisable social activism attracted friendship, commendation, and honour from notable local and international persons and organisations. In 1992, a special 'life achievement' prize was bestowed on him at the Kumasi Brewery Limited and the Sports Writers Association of Ghana (the SWAG) awards night at the Golden Tulip Hotel in Accra. As Perpetual Crensil of the *PDG* (March 30, 1992, 15) reported, the ceremony honoured the nation's outstanding sports personalities and writers. The SWAG proclaimed March 28, 1992 as 'Azumah Nelson Day in Ghana' for sportspersons. A certificate – 'Life Achievement Award' – from the SWAG signed by Mr H.P. Nyametei, the President of the Council of Patrons for



the SWAG and Mr Joe Aggrey, the President of the SWAG, was presented to him by the PNDC member responsible for sports affairs, Lt Gen. Arnold Quainoo (*PDG*, March 30, 1992, 15; *Sporting Times*, March 31, 1982, 1). It celebrated his legend and 'his tremendous contribution to the sport of boxing, and in deep appreciation for being the greatest Ghanaian sports hero and setting an example to the youths of Ghana' (*PDG*, March 30, 1992, 15; *Sporting Times*, March 31, 1). Moreover, he became a fellow in the International Boxing Hall of Fame, an accomplishment that further imprinted Ghana's name on international consciousness.

José Sulaiman, president of the WBC, declared, in an address to mark the launch of the Azumah Nelson Foundation, that these successes and sterling life qualities had convinced the WBC to give him 'the greatest respect and admiration' by conferring on him the honorific title of 'the WBC Emeritus Champion for Life'³. The same went for his appointment in January 1999 as the WBC World Champion Ambassador for Africa. This occurred just a few months after the WBC honoured him at a ceremony where 'he was described as the greatest boxing champion born in Africa' (Akyeampong 2002, 48), at the 36th Annual WBC convention in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The convention, which attracted a number of international VIPs, was opened by Nelson Mandela on October 26, 1998 in Johannesburg, South Africa.⁴ It was at this venue that he formally announced, amidst a remarkable standing ovation from the dignitaries, his retirement (*Daily Guide Sports News*, July 25, 2007). According to Sam[my] Okaitey, José Sulaiman hailed the announcement and said that it had come from a man who had lived a sporting life with dignity (*GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 1, 12). The boxing icon acknowledged the importance of honouring sports personalities for positive accomplishments and seized the international platform to articulate the frustration that African sportspeople and boxers experience because of the widespread paucity of proper training facilities. It was a campaign for African boxers and sportspersons in general. Lamenting the prevalence of poor training facilities, he emphasised that it denied maximum growth of natural ability. It was sad, he noted, that most accomplished boxers evolved from impoverished social backgrounds and few had been properly honoured in history. He decried the frustration that many suffered from unscrupulous managers and greedy foreign promoters (Okaitey, *GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 12).

His plea for an overhaul of boxing in Africa was timely. It made relevant the earmarked US\$100 000 by the WBC, disclosed by Nelson Mandela at the opening of the 36th Annual World Boxing Council (WBC) Convention, in Johannesburg, South Africa, on 26 October, 1998, for the construction of two gymnasiums in South Africa to prop up the sport in Africa and, as agreed by the WBC, further develop boxing infrastructure in South Africa (Okaitey, *GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 1). Okaitey also reported that the WBC had commissioned Nii Cofie Ajenkwa III, Nii Quaye

Mensah and Azumah Nelson to solicit from the government a site big enough for the construction of a WBC-supported boxing complex in Accra. When José Sulaiman, the WBC president, first announced the appointment of Azumah Nelson as WBC World Champion Ambassador for Africa in Mexico, in recognition of his venerable and influential stature in boxing in Africa, he pointed out that some assistance would be offered to erect a boxing gym in Accra to lionise and eternalise the name and memory of the boxing icon, who he was sure would continue to carry his dignity 'to show the children and the youth of Africa, the type of behaviour an athlete needs to reach the highest level' (Okaitey, *GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 12).

Other honours have been conferred upon him in his country in appreciation of his struggle to help people and communities to effect and obtain positive social and economic transformation in their lives. In July 2004 SCANCOR Ghana Limited, a telecommunication company that operated the Spacefon telephone network, and Charterhouse Ghana, a programmes and events organising group, named him as Spacefon (Sports) Legend. The award was one that was created to be bestowed on an accomplished living Ghanaian personality whose life had made a mark in his or her field of endeavour. It celebrated an individual career and professional excellence that had made a lasting contribution to Ghana's social, economic and/or political life. His immense contribution to the growth of boxing was also a reason why he was nominated for the award. When Moses Foh Amoaning announced the nomination at a ceremony at the Jazz Optimist Club in Accra, he extolled:

... his exploits in the boxing ring, which united the people of Ghana and put the name of Ghana on the world map, eventually earning him a place in the international Boxing Hall of Fame, [as] the first [living continental] African to receive such an honour. (*ghanamusic.com*, July 22, 2004).

The Spacefon award was formally received on his behalf by his wife Peggy at an awards night at the National Theatre in Accra in September 2004. Abrantie Amakye Dede, the renowned popular highlife musician, was the second distinguished honouree for the evening. He received the Spacefon (Music) Legend award. Two years later, Azumah Nelson, received further recognition for his meritorious excellence in sports and his work as a social advocate. The Ghana government nominated him for the Order of the Volta medal (*DG*, March 23, 2006, 14). Accordingly, the government bestowed on him the medal on Ghana's National Honours Award Day in June 2006. It is one of the highest state and national laurels conferred on people for diverse services.

An interesting campaign area in which he engaged and served was environmental protection. His advocacy started with tree planting exercises during his days of active professional boxing, to promote the initiative of conservation among the public.



Ghana's ecosystems are degrading at an alarming and rapid rate, due to poor and illegal practices such as indiscriminate mining, over-logging of timber for export and fuel, and poor waste management. Azumah Nelson thus campaigned for an awareness of the fragility of the environment and the need to protect it with good practices in both rural and urban areas.

He desired to see Accra relieved of its widespread septic condition – filth – which was a major nurturer and escalator of malaria cases in the city, especially its ghettos. He desired the same for other urban and rural communities in Ghana. This formed part of his persistent environmental protection views. His compelling personality and efforts at the forefront of a pro-environment and anti-rubbish and anti-malaria campaign for health and sustainable development endeared him to Ghana's Ministry of Environment and Science and inspired it to honour and encourage him. In 2004, he rescheduled a trip to the USA for his induction into the Boxing Hall of Fame and participated in a coconut tree planting exercise at the Sakumono Beach, near Tema. This was part of activities to commemorate World Environment Day on June 5, 2004 (*Ghanaweb.com*, July 21, 2004). He later travelled to the USA, and in the presence of about 2 000 boxing fans, his Class of 2004 inductees, which included light-heavyweight Dwight Muhammad Qawi of the USA, former welterweight champion Carlos Palomino and bantamweight Daniel Zaragoza of Mexico, promoter J. Russell Peltz, and South African referee Stanley Christodoulou, was enshrined in the Hall of Fame on June 13, 2004 (*Ghanaweb.com*, June 14, 2004).

On Monday, July 19, 2004, the Ministry of Environment and Science awarded him the title 'Environmental Ambassador' (*Ghanaweb.com*, July 21, 2004) to motivate him to continue his support for the ministry's campaign to strengthen the public's consciousness about environmental matters. Kasim Kasanga, the Minister of Environment and Science, stated that the honour was 'In view of the interest shown over the years in environmental conservation and protection...'. The Environmental Ambassador reaffirmed his openness to poverty reduction activities and schemes and pledged to assist the ministry's endeavours (*Ghanaweb.com*, July 21, 2004). Believing that the lack of effective and appropriate harnessing of the environment bred poverty, he travelled to parts of the country with the message that environmental protection alleviates poverty.

In September 2004, he went to the Western Region to campaign. Furthermore, he advertised the idea of an Eco-Tourism Festival (ECOFEST), which aimed to promote eco-tourism and environmental awareness through activities such as seminars, photo exhibitions, public receptions held by Ghanaian chiefs which are locally known as durbars, and musical concerts. Formulated under the theme 'Water for Life', ECOFEST 2004, the third in a series of celebrations, was scheduled to take place in October in that region. He noticed the yawning lack and inadequacy of some

basic necessities of life in the Western Region such as potable water in some schools, for instance the Ekuasi Twin City Special School for the Mentally Handicapped and the Sekondi School for the Deaf. He publicly appealed to philanthropists to help the schools and presented a cheque for 10 million cedis to each of the two special schools (*GNA*, September 5, 2004).

His reputation as a major contributor to nation building, praised by J.J. Rawlings, also earned him the amity, respect and honour of other notables, including several indigenous paramount chiefs. These leaders included the Ga Mantse Nii Amugi II, who died in 2004, and Oseadeeyo Nana Addo Danquah III, the Okuapehene (Paramount Chief of Okuapeman or Akwapem State). The latter even consummated their friendship by officially elevating him with a lofty indigenous title in April 1992. The indigenous Akan ethnic group's regal designation of *Barima*, which connotes a man of strength, power and affluence, was conferred on him at a grand durbar in Akropong, the capital of Akwapem. This title is like the Ga *oblempo*n. He had a non-regal antecedent in his own ethnic group, yet his fistic prowess and warrior spirit in the ring fundamentally earned him a noble rank elsewhere. In other words, the martial art and sport of boxing catapulted Azumah Nelson to the chiefly position of *Barima* and negotiated a royal identity for him in Okuapeman. According to Frank Mensah (*GS*, April 21–27, 1992, 3), this title made him an honorary citizen and divisional chief of the Akropong-Akwapem area. Nana Ofei Nkansah, Gyasehene (a divisional chief) of Akropong, explained the title's essence as 'exciting, unconquerable, unchallengeable and never to be beaten' (*GS*, April 21–27, 1992, 3). As an honorary divisional chief, Azumah Nelson was given the rank of *Ankobia* (Ankobeahene).⁵ This meant that he could counsel the Paramount Chief.

The grand pomp and pageantry he experienced at the awards ceremony, which occurred on a Saturday in Akropong, astonished him because he had attended thinking that he was attending a fête in his honour. He was unaware that the magnificent service of enstoolment characterised by all the customary attributes of an indigenous royal durbar awaited him. He left his Achimota home in the morning for Akropong. His small entourage included his lawyer, Mr Ansa Asare and his family, and his children David, Dorinda and Doris, who kept calling him *Nana o, nana o*, (Chief, chief) in admiration of his royal fashion; he was clad in a splendid Asante woven Adinkra cloth. His personal friend, Mr Antwi Gyamfi, also accompanied him.

Frank Mensah (*GS*, April 21–27, 1992, 3) wrote that a delegation from the Okuapehene met them at the outskirts of Akropong. *Fontonfrom* drumming and dancing, a highly symbolised artistic homage among Akan peoples, was performed for him at a durbar of *Nananom* (royals and chiefs), citizens and visitors. The Okuapehene referred to him as his foster son and invoked blessings on him and his profession and social endeavours. The Okuapehene and his elders gave him a



crown and sat him on a stool, a symbol of political office. He obligatorily performed a dance to *fontomfrom* drumming. Articulating his gratitude to the Okuapehene and Okuapeman, he stated: 'I understand this honour is normally done to people over 60 years of age. I'll therefore do my best to protect the confidence reposed in me' (GS, April 21–27, 1992, 3). Counselling the youth present to be God-fearing and disciplined, and avoid drugs, alcoholism and social vices, he added: 'My laurels are due to my fear for God and discipline'. Frank Mensah reported that during the ceremony in Akropong the District Secretary, Mr Okae, asked the youth to emulate his self-discipline and develop their natural talent (GS, April 21–27, 1992, 3). The Okuapehene and Kwakwaduam Fekuw, a benevolent society of Akropong citizens, honoured him with a reception at the Presbyterian College of Education in Akropong. As usual, he made donations to the State. He generously planted some trees and promised to donate 100 000 cedis to the Kwakwaduam Fekuw. He thanked the State for the gift of a parcel of land which he was asked to develop, pledging to return to it.

The nineteenth-century history of his indigenous Ga-Mashie, as discussed earlier, shows how the media of martial power and/or economic affluence negotiated the making of *mokpakpa*, *niiatse*, *sikatse* or *oblempon*. Such individuals were celebrated *tabiloi* or successful in martial endeavours and/or amassing of material wealth, who effectively deployed their powers and fame to reconfigure their social positions and bargain for political recognition and statuses of regality. Such persons became honorary holders of *sei* (the stool) and influential political officers. Like his forebears, Azumah Nelson's merit in boxing aided his rise to the eminence of a regal officer in Akropong. His boxing influence gave him the character and embodied personhood of an *oblempon*, *sikatse*, *mokpakpa* and a *tabilo*. Thus, this twentieth-century *oblempon* managed to occupy an honorary royal office because of his boxing legend – a *tabilo* of boxing. *Mokpakpa* he became because of his position as national dignitary and icon, and his success as a financially wealthy person made him a *sikatse*.

As a sponsor of social projects, even after retirement, he became a technical director of the GBA because of his sustained commitment to supporting boxing progress in Ghana. Because of the widespread paucity of good training facilities, he availed his Zoom Zoom Gym in his Achimota residence to some of the budding professional boxers in Ghana. He also put his boxing expertise and ambassadorial position in Africa to the beneficial service of non-Ghanaian boxers and teams. On July 25, 2007, *Daily Guide Sports News* reported that he provided technical and supervisory consultancy services to the Burkina Faso National Boxing team to help strengthen Burkinabe boxing and its national team. The team, in its scheme of things, planned to get him to work with Jean Pierre Mahe, a former French lightweight champion, to groom and develop professional and amateur boxers in

Burkina Faso. The advisory service rendered rewarded him financially, but it carried a wider relevance to Ghana and Africa. It was healthy for the diplomatic relationship between Ghana and Burkina Faso, and good for Ghana's image because it indicated that the country's reputation as a nation of boxing prowess and heroic achievements was highly recognisable and deemed important in Africa.

The Burkinabe delegation, which comprised a coach, an assistant and five boxers, spent three weeks of their training tour in Ghana, and trained at Azumah Nelson's gym (*Daily Guide Sports News*, July 25, 2007). It agreed to institute a memorandum of understanding to strengthen its ties with the boxing legend and ambassador so that the team 'would have the opportunity to come to Ghana for training under the supervision of Azumah, who would also go to Burkina Faso whenever the country was preparing for boxing tournaments' (*Daily Guide Sports News*, July 25, 2007). This agreement was formally instituted. Consequently, Coach Jean Pierre Mahe and four Burkinabe fighters, Kabore Alexis, a bantamweight; Sou-Tohe Patrice, a welterweight; Kabore Boniface, a super-middleweight; and Kabore Irissa, a super-welterweight; returned to his gym in 2008 to prepare for world-class competitions. Coach Mahe explained to Pierre Toto of the *DG* (Sports News, April 9, 2008) that Ghana was selected for their build-up because,

[i]n Ouagadougou, my boxers lacked sparring partners due to their status as professional boxers. Therefore, we find it convenient to travel to Ghana as one of the boxing nations on the continent for training. Out of over 300 boxers in Burkina [Faso], only four are professionals.

The team was thus in Ghana to 'tap the experience of the boxing professor' (*DG Sports News*, April 9, 2008). The Burkina Faso Boxing Federation, according to the Frenchman, intended to have an enduring relationship with the 'boxing professor' to facilitate training, sparring and preparation of its boxers for whenever international fights and title bouts were imminent. He also considered the 'boxing professor', who allowed the team to use his gym, as magnanimous and a great personality out of the ring (*DG Sports News*, April 9, 2008).

Despite his many significant international positions, and recognition and wealth, his proverbial empathy and unassuming way of life, which were commended by his manager Oko Kwatekwei in the video documentary *Nelson: Ghana. Out of Africa* (2010), have continued to influence him to live a simple life in his retirement. He travels or has meetings to lobby and solicit assistance and raise funds for his charitable deeds. He embarks on trips as goodwill ambassador of the environment and attends meetings of the GABA and boxing tournaments. His visits to his farms and livestock ranch remove him from the hustle and bustle of the city and give him periods of rest, solace and serenity amidst the simplicity of animals and plants. He also likes to spend



time at his home with Peggy and their children. His son Dalvin has taken a keen interest in amateur boxing as a hobby (See Cook, *West Australian*, August 14, 2010; Cook, *Azumah Nelson Foundation blog*, August 23, 2010). Thus, he enjoys teaching Dalvin, who is known in the Ghanaian boxing fraternity as Azumah Nelson, Jr, some useful techniques in his gym. He cares for his pets which include dogs and birds. Firm in Christianity, he makes time to read the Bible and attend church and other Christian functions. Additionally, he swims at home, warms up, hits the punching bag and spars in his gym for fitness for his everyday work, which includes directing and managing his businesses.

His business ventures are dear to him. While some dissolved because they became unsustainable, were beset with managerial problems or contradicted his values, others still operate under his overall direction. His busy schedule as a boxer and his travels gave him inadequate time to dedicate effectively to overseeing the efficient running of all his ventures, hence the problems and closures of some.

In a personal interview on February 10, 2011, he explained that he had stopped importing cooking oil, Zoom Zoom Oil, for retailers, and abandoned the capital-intensive marine fishing with boats, because he eventually found them unrewarding financially as a result of dwindling returns. He shut down others because he realised that they contravened his ethical principles. When he suspected that some of his big trucks, which carted goods to and from other West African countries like Niger and Burkina Faso, perhaps, were clandestinely conveying some regulated goods and merchandise like diesel and petrol to destinations without official permission, he sold the trucks because such deals 'were against my principles of honesty and hard work ... I closed it down to save my image [from being tarnished] and people, who were doing such wrong things, [from falling into trouble with the legal system]'.

In his fervour to make commercial profit and provide employment, in his prime as a boxer he imported alcoholic drink, especially liquor, to sell in Ghana. Later he found it more profitable to manufacture the beverages for the Ghanaian and international markets. Hence, he established a distillery to produce assorted liquor, including the popular Zoom Zoom Dry Gin. The entrepreneur in him was happy with the profit then. However, he later halted operations and shut the distillery down. Why? His conscience! He related that as a businessman, he had

...started the distillery ... who[se] ... products would be drunk by grown-ups, who could make mature decisions ... I later realised that young people and kids [like people that I sought to inspire to greatness and away from vices such as alcoholism] were also drinking the product, so my mind [my conscience] told me that it was wrong and should stop. So, I closed it. I did not want to sell the distillery because I felt that in the hands of another entrepreneur, he [or she] would have continued to produce the drinks...

Moreover, as a person who professed the virtue of giving to society, he added:

I felt that I could not make cash and lead people the wrong way into drinking ... It did not feel right. ... I stopped the production of the alcoholic drinks.

Giving to society: The Azumah Nelson Foundation

As a retired boxer, he has defined himself as not a rich, but a satisfied, self-made wealthy man with numerous assets and diverse landed property. He dabbled a bit in real estate and acquired and leased residential and office premises. With Peggy's support, they directed his restaurants and the Peggy Nelson [Students] Hostel, and derived revenue from a teak plantation, which produced wood used locally and exported for furniture and pylons for telephone and electricity cables. These ventures have also been sources of jobs for many people.

Beside these material gains and possessions, he claimed to have psychological happiness and emotional contentment for succeeding in boxing and accomplishing most of his aims for himself and society. He strengthened Ga-Mashie's cultural reputation and identity as a boxing people and invested his wealth in his nuclear and extended families, and in society through his charity work.

Moreover, he fulfilled his lifelong ambition of establishing a sports academy. The estimated US\$23 444 960 venture – the Azumah Nelson Foundation (AZNEF, also known as the ANF) and sports academy – will mentor and care for marginalised and needy boys and girls, and instruct them in sports, formal academic literacy and numeracy, character formation, leadership and career choices. In a personal interview in February, 2011, he explained:

This [foundation and academy] is my second ... most important and ultimate life journey ... after [the first leg of] my life's journey – boxing [which started in the hardships of the slums] ... through the ring [and international limelight] and ended in retirement. This second phase of my life, which seeks ... the ANF [and its products], is what I have dedicated my entire [out of the ring] life to.

Potentially, ANF's work will significantly augment and enhance Ghana's profuse human resources and huge sports, especially boxing, potential. The abilities, raw talent and drive for sports are abundant in Ghana. What is lacking is proper and modern training facilities and centres for formal theoretical and practical instruction in sports and boxing. This has been the concern of national and international experts alike. In 1999, Kwabena Agyei-Boahene and Eric Enchill (*GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 12) reported that Miguel Perez Castellanos, the Cuban coach of the Black Bombers, had appealed to the State to build a boxing academy for harnessing the talents of young Ghanaians. Castellanos was aware that Ga-Mashie's proverbial efforts, improvisation



and self-help had provided most of Ghana's champions, yet he believed that 'Ghana, [not only Bukom] has great potential in amateur boxing (the necessary foundation in boxing) which needs to be tapped' (*GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 12). The stellar performances of Cuban boxers at many international tournaments, he affirmed, were due to government support for amateur boxing in Cuba, hence he remarked:

Although I seem to understand the situation in this country [Ghana], I still believe that there is the need for active support for boxing by the government ... Though boxing ranks second [to football] in international sports in this country, it brings in more medals, than any other sport. ... Boxing ... help[ed] Ghana place 15th overall at the Commonwealth Games [held in 1998] in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia ... as [a] result of four medals won by the boxers.⁶

Similarly, Azumah Nelson had been concerned about the future of boxing. In 1999, he was already formulating an idea towards the establishment of an adequately equipped sports academy in Ghana to train the youth. He was saving part of his prize money and revenue from his businesses to accumulate funds to kick-start the project in the future – during his retirement. He purchased land that would accommodate the superstructure of the academy, which he intended to place in the care of a foundation. The physical manifestation of this cherished idea formally occurred in 2008 when the ANF was publicly inaugurated.

Registered as a non-profit humanitarian organisation under Ghana's Company Code, 1963 ('Azumah Nelson Foundation', n.d., 1), the ANF was officially launched alongside a fund-raiser in September 27, 2008, at the State Banquet Hall in Accra. Its Executive Council was headed by Paul Victor Obeng, a former member of the PNDC. Other members of the council included Azumah Nelson, Peggy Nelson, Dorinda Nelson and Freddie Annan (*GNA*, Sports News, September 29, 2008).

Despite his money and fame, his record of philanthropy and high connections, and the honour of having the Kaneshie Sports Complex in Accra renamed Azumah Nelson Sports Complex by government directive to memorialise him, he revealed in a 2011 personal interview that he considered that the establishment of the ANF added significant credit to his name. Moreover, its success would be a meaningful and enduring legacy to Ghanaians and Africa, and the greatest of his numerous acts of charity and assistance to social growth. Through its academy and associated programmes, the ANF seeks to combine the forces of literacy, moral and sports education to advance the general and career development of its targeted group, especially those aged between five and sixteen, because:

Not every person can make a successful academic life. Some can do well in sports and in other vocations ... children and the ... youth must be exposed to different paths and guided to [identify and] select [the ones that they have

special flair for]. The academy ... shall expose the students to instructions in academics and sports ... [and] in other vocations ... [and] guide each student to select and concentrate in an area that they have talents ... to develop [their flair] for future excellence and a productive tomorrow. (Azumah Nelson, pers. comm., February 10, 2011)

The envisaged ultra-modern infrastructure of the Azumah Nelson Foundation Academy comprises a management block, double-storeyed hostels, a memorial library with information and communication technology (ICT) facilities, a clinic, a dining hall, a sports hall and indoor arenas, a gymnasium and a chapel. In addition, there are staff apartments, a stadium with multi-tiered spectators' seats and multiple courts,⁷ a swimming pool and changing rooms, a two-floored complex comprising offices, laboratories, a conference hall, and primary and junior high-school-level classrooms, and, starting from August 2011, a farm⁸ to produce food for the students. Inspired by its founder's conviction

... that with the support of resourceful individuals and society, every deprived child in Ghana ... will grow to become responsible individuals and contribute their quota to the development of their respective countries and the continent,

the ANF has encouraged both national and international people and organisations to provide material, intellectual and financial support for its noble objective ('Azumah Nelson Foundation', n.d.). Erick Osei reported that, at the launching ceremony, Mr Osei Bonsu Amoah, Ghana's Deputy Minister of Education, Science and Sports, lauded the idea as dignified and complementary to Ghana's social development efforts and agenda to identify and groom talents for sports in Ghana (*ireportghana.com*, December 7, 2008). By acclamation, all those present, including government officials, famous boxers such as Juan La Porte and Ike Quartey, representatives of the WBC and GABA and local sports persons, accented his vision as splendid and kind. Explaining the rationale further, Azumah Nelson declared that society, the nation and the world must give a fair and meaningful chance to all children to make them productive for themselves and society. Children, he said, '...must not suffer for the mistakes of their parents. Society owes them a duty to prepare them for a meaningful future. And with what I have been blessed, I want to do my bit' (*DG*, General News, October 8, 2008). Subsequently, Ike Quartey, Juan La Porte and other dignitaries pledged to support the foundation.

His commitment to the rationale of the ANF suggested that the quest for all shades of positive transformation in Ghana and Africa was the responsibility of both individuals and government in many ways. Boxing gave him a chance and opportunity to show his usefulness to society, so he believed that given the right opportunities, each individual could fully do the same. 'All around the world', he said,



... children and even adults have proved that given the opportunity, they can make something meaningful in their lives. I was given the chance through boxing, [to shape my identity and future and I succeeded]. Many others have had similar opportunities through sports or something else from well-meaning people. This is, therefore, a proof that no one is useless. (DG, General News, October 8, 2008)

He thus lobbied old boxing friends, international sports icons, sports clubs and groups, philanthropic agencies, banks, funding agencies, the WBC, and some CEOs in Ghana and around the globe for material assistance and funds for the foundation's administrative work and construction of the academy. Such donors included David Harper⁹ and Geodrill Ghana Limited, a mineral prospecting, drilling and mining consultancy firm in West Africa. A boxing enthusiast and friend of Azumah Nelson, Harper, who is an Australian and director of Geodrill, supported the making and premiering of *Zoom Zoom – The Professor: The career of Azumah Nelson*, a Geodrill-financed and Sam Kissie-produced documentary feature film. Ernest Dela Aglanu (*Myjoyonline News*, April 19, 2010) reported that the premier and auction, in April 2010 at the Silverbird Cinema in Accra, raised over 20 million cedis for the ANF. Furthermore, according to Jonathan Cook (*Azumah Nelson Foundation blog*, August 23, 2010), returns from sold copies of the film and his booklet – *Azumah Nelson, The Professor: 12 Rounds of Boxing and Life*, and proceeds from fundraising ceremonies and charity dinners in Ghana and places abroad such as Perth have supplemented the project. Moreover, Jon Ralph wrote in the *Herald Sun* on October 14, 2008 that Azumah Nelson, promising to incorporate Australian football¹⁰ into the academy's curriculum, used his fame and popularity in Australia to contact and invite financial donations from the Western Bulldogs team, its manager James Fantasia, and the Australian Football League to assist the ANF (*World Footy News*, June 11, 2009) to raise the project's seed money estimated at US\$23 444 960. Money from donor support and innovative projects of the ANF would run the academy in future.

The formal opening of the site of the academy, a 50-acre piece of land situated at Akuse in the Eastern Region, happened on September 27, 2008. The sod-cutting ceremony signalled the official beginning of construction and phase one of the ANF's project. Describing it as his 'next endeavour' of humanitarianism, Azumah Nelson stated: 'After all, I [who was less fortunate, eventually] made it in my professional life [so I should do my bit to help others to make their lives meaningful and positively productive]' (DG General News, October 8, 2008). Juan La Porte, who was among the guests present at Akuse, applauded the initiative as 'a laudable idea which deserves the support of all', and announced that 'Azumah Nelson is a great man and I am impressed with his vision ... I am willing to support him in whatever way I can to make his dream succeed' (DG General News, October 8, 2008).

As founder and life patron of the ANF, Azumah Nelson invited some experienced and knowledgeable associates to help with the effective running and direction of the enterprise. Consequently, a Board of Trustees was instituted. It included P.V. Obeng, V. Crabbe, a former Justice of Ghana's Supreme Court, Kwaku Ansa Asare, a past Director of the Ghana School of Law, Reginald Ocansey, an independent education management professional, Ms Jamilia Jakalia, a professional lawyer and secretary to the board, Eddie Duplan, a businessman and former chairman of the GABA, and Sandy Anderson, an entrepreneur and the chairman of Aquatec Services Limited.

He and his associates defined the stages that the academy project would go through and operationalise under the aegis of the ANF. He mentioned in a personal interview in 2011 that they projected 2014/2015 as the end of the first major phase of preparatory events and activities, including the completion of the building. The planned events, which were intended to start around January 2011, included nationwide programmes of street clinics, street festivals, and street sporting camps planned for the selection of needy talented and brilliant youths, especially street children, from both the rural and urban areas for the academy. Volunteer teachers, coaches, trainers and experts were to be invited to contribute their skills, resources and knowledge towards such efforts of the ANF. They were to instruct the participating youth in the basics of the techniques and rules of sports such as football, boxing, basketball and athletics (Azumah Nelson Foundation, June 17, 2010) and offer purposefully designed mathematics and reading aptitude lessons. Street cups or mini sports tournaments, a social fête offering food and beverages, awards, games, quizzes and exhibition sports matches by professional and notable persons were planned to bring a selection season to an end. This was to be the customary method of getting students into the academy in its fully operational phase. The academy's operation was planned to commence in 2014/2015.

Azumah Nelson and the ANF planned that after some time the academy, as part of its medium-term plan, would admit children from other African countries. In its long-term vision, it would admit and serve children abroad through international exchange programmes designed to integrate the cultures and sporting abilities of the youth of Africa and the rest of the world ('Azumah Nelson Foundation', n.d.). In a personal interview on October 5, 2009, he expressed the hope that the idea would be adopted by philanthropists and governments, and the academy would be replicated in parts of Ghana and Africa to help alleviate social hardships and the scourges of ignorance and illiteracy because

I don't like it when I see people suffering from financial and material poverty because of ignorance, illiteracy [and]/or because they don't have vocational skills which could have provided them with employment ... to ... live well. I don't like to see people suffer, especially children and teenagers.



Moreover, he added, 'I know how painful it is. I did not finish school. This ... should not happen to people ... we must ... stop such situations ... [and work] to the positive shaping of the future of the younger generation in Ghana and Africa.'

The greatest good you can do for another, he claimed, 'was not just to share your riches but to reveal to him [or her] his [or her] own riches'. This is like the Chinese philosophical adage 'Give a person a fish and you feed him [or her] for a day. Teach a person to fish and you feed him [or her] for a lifetime'.¹¹ He disclosed that:

I believe that my ideas, vision and the institution's goals can significantly help Ghana and Africa to find ways to provide useful education, effective personal improvement techniques and positive counselling to disadvantaged ... youth to show them how to become self-assisted and well-inspired adults ... my efforts would inspire African governments and philanthropists to start similar projects.

This work, he claimed 'is what the rest of my life has been dedicated to and I hope that my work will be meaningful, sustainable and successful'.

In retirement, his modest personality and known social activism and charity continued to command strong respect and admiration – 'Azumahphilia' – from the public. Frequently, different members of society, especially school children and the street proletariat of hawkers and peddlers and market women, would pour joyful cheers, smiles, and greetings on their champion and folk and national hero wherever they recognised him. His name truly became an esteemed one in Ghana; it was justifiably the stuff of legends.

Defocusing and demystifying it from mythical and supernatural beings and/or events, and refocusing the term 'legend' in the context of human history and actual life situations, so that it will construe an illustrious celebrity whose noteworthy excellence and accomplishments in a sector or areas of human endeavour have profoundly impacted on human society, it is understandable that Azumah Nelson is a legend. Considering his fame and excellence in boxing, and his iconic status, and influence in and on society, it is correct to distinguish him as such. Against all odds and difficulties, he excelled in a significant and phenomenal way in his chosen field of social endeavour – boxing. Furthermore, his career has been a source of reference and a benchmark for excellence in the boxing world both nationally and internationally. His iconic image has been a source of hope and inspiration for many in various social spheres and circles. Moreover, his person and social work, during both his active days as a boxer and his retirement, have provided opportunities for people in Ghana and Africa to improve their social and economic lives and situations. The awards and recognitions that his sterling qualities have attracted from the public are numerous. In November 2008, just weeks after he launched the ANF, he was nominated to receive another important international recognition to celebrate his legend. The

Commonwealth Boxing Council (CBC) awarded him with the prestigious Dennie Mancini Award at a ceremony organised by the CBC and British Boxing Board of Control in London. This splendid trophy, sculptured by Tanya Petersen of Creative Spiral (Commonwealth Boxing Council, n.d.), is a bronze bust of Dennie Mancini, a highly respected figure in British boxing, who died at the age of 71 on September 10, 2004 (*Telegraph*, September 16, 2004).

Mancini was influential in the careers of some great Commonwealth champions from the 1960s onwards. These included Lotte Mwale and Chisanda Mutti of Zambia, and Lionel Rose, Johnny Famechon, Lester Ellis and Paul Ferrari of Australia. He also worked with Franco Wanyama of Uganda, Lloyd Honeyghan, Billy Hardy and Billy Schwer of England, Gary Jacobs of Scotland and Howard Eastman of Guyana. His links transcended Britain and the Commonwealth to Italy, Holland and Germany (Commonwealth Boxing Council, n.d.). He worked as a manager, promoter, trainer, famous cuts-man and agent for over half a century. He worked with Mickey Duff in the 1970s, prepared champions like Johnny Clark and Tony Humm, and worked with boxers like Joe Bugner and Frank Bruno. He is popular and unforgettable for his in-between rounds patching of the wounds of world champions like Britain's Richie Woodhall, Chris Eubank and Nigel Benn, and the German boxers Sven Ottke and Henry Maske (*Telegraph*, September 16, 2004). He also helped to manage the business of the famous sportswear company called Lonsdale in London. The Dennie Mancini Trophy was instituted by the Directors of the CBC to mark and eternalise his memorable contribution to boxing, especially in the Commonwealth. Awarded annually, the trophy celebrates individuals who achieved the most aims of Commonwealth boxing in a year.¹² The CBC gave it to Azumah Nelson in recognition of his inauguration of the ANF and determination and work to give to others opportunities that might otherwise not be available to them.

Simon Block, honorary secretary of the CBC, explained that the trophy 'is awarded to the person who, in the relevant year, has done the most to represent the interests of, or raise the profile of boxing in the Commonwealth' (*DG*, November 17, 2008). Moreover, Block added,

By the inauguration of the Azumah Nelson Foundation, you [Azumah Nelson] bring great distinction to the sport of professional boxing, and this has only added to your long list of achievements as a champion of both the Commonwealth and the world.

On November 18, 2008, Azumah Nelson and his wife Peggy and Yoofi Boham attended the awards ceremony. Ghana's Deputy High Commissioner to the UK and Ireland, Mr Zed Grant Essilfie, and the Chairman of the CBC, Professor Ingram



Singh, were among the dignitaries present. According to Nana Sifa Twum (*DG*, November 21, 2008), Ingram Singh paid a glowing tribute to the awardee for his selflessness and applauded his long list of prestigious achievements and distinctive service to boxing, both as a Commonwealth and World champion. He encouraged him to persevere in his service to humanity. After accepting the trophy, the honouree implored his listeners to support the ANF because many of the children that it intended to help were those who might not get the same opportunity that some of the people present at the ceremony had had to develop their God-given talents. To a thunderous ovation from the audience, which comprised members of the boxing fraternity and business community, he pledged:

So for the rest of my life, the focus will be to create opportunities for them [less fortunate children] to acquire skills through formal education and sports and for them to be useful to the society. (*Ghanaweb.net*, Boxing News, November 20, 2008)

The august gathering was impressed by the icon's devotion and avowal to give opportunities to others to 'aspire to where he has reached and beyond' (Twum, *DG*, November 21, 2008).

Notes

- 1 Such boxers display tremors, an expressionless face and slow and imbalanced gait. They have impaired memory and loss of or reduced ability for verbal articulation and blink reflexes.
- 2 Mr Bamfo's friendship with Azumah Nelson got him involved in the development of amateur boxing in Ghana. In 1994, his business provided a trophy and funds to support the GABA to organise the Individual Amateur Boxing Championships, at the Accra Sports Hall, to select a regional team for the Greater Accra. Consequently, the event was called 'Sikkens' and the organisers planned to replicate it in other regions to select boxers to form the core of the Black Bombers (*DG*, October 7, 1994, 15).
- 3 A video recorded address by José Sulaiman to mark the launch of the Azumah Nelson Foundation See '*Azumah Nelson*,' YouTube, (9:46 minutes), uploaded by cmbnотicias, September, 18, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MK-ceLIZbZA> (Information was retrieved on November 19, 2010).
- 4 South Africa, Office of the President, 'Address by President Mandela on the opening of the 36th Annual World Boxing Council (W.B.C.) Convention, Johannesburg, 26 October, 1998,' *South African Government Information*, http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/1998/98a27_0x6059811277.html (Information was retrieved on October 22, 2010).
- 5 *Ankobe* is construed as 'one who stays at home or does not go anywhere'. *Ankobeahene*, in the Akan political hierarchy, is a caretaker of the paramount chief's palace and a counsellor to the paramount chief.

- 6 Reportedly he had helped boxers to win 13 gold, 16 silver and 16 bronze medals for the country. See Kwabena Agyei-Boahene and Eric Enchill, 'Cuban Coach calls for Boxing Academy,' *GS*, January 22–25, 1999, 12.
- 7 Plan and design provided by Azumah Nelson. See also Section on Funding Purpose, 'Floor Plans for the ANF Academy' n.d., Azumah Nelson Foundation; and Computer-Generated Imagery supported 3-dimensional graphics image of the academy, 'ANF Project', n.d.
- 8 See Section on Funding Purpose, Azumah Nelson Foundation, 'ANF Project', n.d.
- 9 He served on the sponsorship committee of the GABA and donated to Ray Quarcio's Bridge Foundation and the Azumah Nelson Foundation for developing sports and boxing.
- 10 Australian Rules football or footy. Its form looks like a hybrid of soccer, American football and rugby.
- 11 It has been attributed to Lao Tzu (Tsu) or Laozi, a sixth-century BCE Chinese mystic philosopher and author of the classic *Tao-Te Ching* (Tsu, 1997).
- 12 In 2006 the bantamweight champion, Tshifhiwa Munyai of South Africa won it. The light-middleweight champion Bradley Pryce of Wales won it in 2007. Azumah Nelson won it in 2008 for setting up the ANF. Lightweight champion Amir Khan won it in 2009 for re-building his career after a shattering one-round defeat to capture one of the recognised World championships, and for the example he has set to young people in Britain. (See Commonwealth Boxing Council, 'The Dinnie Mancini Trophy', *The Commonwealth Boxing History*. n.d.)



8

Conclusions

In Chapters 1 and 2, I reviewed the multifaceted theoretical and practical meanings of sports, and the historical development of boxing, from ancient Pharaonic Egyptian, Sumerian, Indus, and Graeco-Roman cultures to the 'modern' and British imperialist period. The powerful religious, economic, recreational, health, political, diplomatic, racial, and practical and symbolic implications of sports in general, and boxing, in particular, have become apparent. For example, the remarkable mediation of British imperial and colonial hegemony through boxing and sports has been elucidated.

Clearly, the complex and deeper social, economic, political and cultural meanings and uses of boxing have maintained it as a crucial activity for groups and individuals worldwide. Nevertheless, this activity, which invites the craving and 'passion'¹ – an intricate love for suffering – of occupational boxers, can elevate or debase, help or hurt, and give 'self-possession' or 'self-dispossession' to those who find it desirable. While they 'love' boxing and endure the suffering that goes with that love, occupational boxers are conscious that the sport and trade could either liberate them from the abyss of absurdity and social obscurity or manacle and relegate them to the very state of marginality, societal oblivion and pain they seek to shun. If a boxer falls into the hands of an insensitive charlatan promoter, neither an egalitarian relationship nor a reasonable partnership will exist between them. Their relationship will be nothing more than an unequal one between a pugilistic prostitute – boxer – and a pugilistic pimp – promoter. The former's body will be sold to agony in the ring for the latter to amass money. It is customary for boxers to toil during their heyday and accrue a great deal of money, only to retire broke and pauperised because they were 'pimped'; exploited by greedy promoters and managers who exercised unfair control and distribution of the monetary returns that their 'prostitutes' made from years of selling and abusing themselves in their intercourse with boxing. From a health-oriented perspective, it is true that a boxer's brain, unfortunately, can at times be damaged by recurrent blows to the head, transforming them into a zombie-like state. Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali are practical illustrations. They became affluent and international icons, but their retirement days were spent in 'social death' and pain caused by symptoms of boxing-induced mid-brain damage and dementia. Boxing can make occupational boxers the

best in the world or the worst. It can put them in the limelight of power but also snuff out the living light in them in death. Undoubtedly boxing, like other sports, professions, and human endeavours that intrinsically possess aspects of physical and psychological torture laced with degrees of risk, has both negative and positive sides. What pulls people to professions regardless of what they may get from them? What inspires them to ignore and/or endure the risks, pain and disappointment that are inherent in and emanate from all professions and endeavours of life? Passion? Yes, passion! In the case of boxing, boxers have a passion to box. This is what has kept it alive and legal globally.² So, what is the future of boxing? Despite advocacies from critics for it, especially professional boxing, to be outlawed internationally, its future is unknown. Currently, many budding boxers in Ghana aspire to becoming like the legendary Azumah Nelson.

I too discussed in Chapter 2 how boxing eventually became a modern globalised commodity that manifested in the Gold Coast, and the historical and cultural dynamics that made it popular among the Ga-Mashie and ultimately find social currency in Ghana. More importantly, the crucial negotiating role that ‘habitus’ plays in people’s gravitation to certain endeavours, especially sporting disciplines such as boxing, became evident. Bourdieu’s postulation that people or groups gravitated to certain sporting behaviours because they had a particular predisposition to sports became tenable. As such, in order to understand this gravitation, it was important to elaborate the habitus of the community. Why? Serious mistakes are likely to occur in any attempt to study sporting practices such as boxing (more so, perhaps, than with any other practices, since their basis and object is the body, the synthesizing agent *par excellence*, which integrates everything that it incorporates), without placing them in the universe of practice that is bound up with them. This is because their common origin is the system of tastes and preferences that is a class (group or ethnic community) habitus (Bourdieu 1991, 367). According to Bourdieu,

... the logic whereby agents incline towards this or that sporting practice cannot be understood unless their dispositions towards sport, which are themselves one dimension of *particular relation to the body*, are reinserted into the unity of the system of dispositions, the habitus, which is the basis from which lifestyles are generated.

The *nomo* tradition’s veneration of strong masculine bodies and the fighting art and sport of *atwele* that helped to provoke *asafo atwele* within the context of Ga-Mashie indigenous martial culture and history provided the fundamental cultural ‘pull’ – the *pugilistic habitus* – for Ga-Mashie’s easy embrace of modern boxing. Today, Ga-Mashie boxers are by general acclamation deemed to be the quintessential boxers in Ghana.



I used chapters 3 to 7 to offer a biographical look at Azumah Nelson. The boxing legend Azumah Nelson, who was a notable product of Ga-Mashie and its boxing culture and Ghanaian boxing, has been discussed in this biography, contextualised within the frame of a social history of boxing in Ghana. This included an interrogation of his ethnic origins and difficult childhood and local environment. His rise to stardom and entry into the enticing and other-worldly universe of local and international VIPs and 'celebrities' came from his excellent boxing and other contingent factors. This study has shed light on the interesting internal and outer contours of his status as a private and family person, national icon, sports legend and social activist.

Significantly, this dual study of biography and social history of boxing in and of colonial and post-colonial Ghana has exemplified boxing and sports as more than simply entertainment. They make meaningful and positive impacts on human society and affect social values. Having interrogated the core social, economic, ideological and cultural significance of boxing in Ghana, this book adds to the history of popular culture, especially sports, and enriches its historiography. The primary educational value is the book's potential to inspire a new generation of Ghanaian, African and international sportspersons to seek with integrity, hard work, and courage, defying all odds, distractions, and hardships to succeed in their fields of endeavour and use their achievements for positive social transformation.

With its focus on Azumah Nelson, this book has literally and metaphorically demonstrated that 'no person is useless'. Under the right conditions, and with the right attitude (determination, tenacity and resilience and NOT a sense of entitlement), right guidance and right opportunities, every person has the potential to succeed and contribute to communal growth and advancement. Ghana's Azumah Nelson has shown this through sport. The clarion call is for the government of Ghana and, by extension, all other African governments, to endeavour to maintain an interest in boxing and sports in general and essentially commit greater financial and material resources to support, improve and sustain their development. Sports have health and employment advantages that could benefit the public. There is considerable talent in Ghana, so it is incumbent upon the government to provide adequate resources for improving the infrastructural, organisational and educational sectors of sports and boxing in the country. Increased international glory and financial rewards could come to Ghana through sports if the conditions for its growth were to receive additional positive support.

Apart from Azumah Nelson, the history of Ghana is replete with other interesting examples of successful players, organisers and promoters whose lives and socioeconomic status were positively transformed by sports. Famous footballers such as Abedi Pele, Samuel Osei Kuffour, Stephen Appiah, Michael Essien and Akwasi Appiah, who also coached the national team (Black Stars), come to mind. Their

rewards benefitted their families, close social associates, communities and country in diverse ways. This supports the premise that sport is a professional undertaking with the capacity to militate against unemployment and provide many, especially the youth, social and economic emancipation to. The postcolonial scourge of unemployment has been prevalent in Ghana. The country's literate and unschooled, virile and active, and employable population have suffered because of this. Hence, many have engaged in illegal activities, such as illegal mining locally called *galamsey*, internet fraud, which has gained notoriety as *Sakawa* in the local lexicon, and armed robbery, with devastating consequences.

Diverse strategies have been employed by successive governments for job creation to minimise and curtail joblessness and poverty. Yet the general situation has continued unabated. Vacancies in factories and opportunities in the civil service sector are always limited. Moreover, such vacancies and opportunities alone cannot guarantee a decent living, self-actualisation, and sound and sustainable wealth for the ever-increasing population. With its attendant environmental problems that oppose the notion of sustainable development, the wanton destruction of Ghana's forests for timber and cocoa farms in the name of wealth and job creation and the satisfaction of international neoliberal market demands cannot and should not continue. The same can be said about mining. The creation of factories, and the jobs they provide, cannot alone alleviate financial and material poverty and unemployment. They have a limited ability to deal with problems because of the immensity of the active job-seeking population. Furthermore, factory work requires certain skills and qualifications and/or some literacy, but a huge number of the unemployed masses are unskilled and illiterate.

This is why the transformative 'magic' of sports becomes more and more relevant. An aggressive governmental effort to support the development of sports in all sectors – infrastructural, organisational, institutional and educational – is necessary for this magic to work effectively. Some international sporting glories and laurels, especially those of football and boxing, have come to Ghana but largely because of the natural talent, determination and the competitive spirit of its sportspeople. Over the years, particularly since 1957, government's efforts to support sports and nurture natural talent have been insignificant. Indeed, sports should become a real and sustained cornerstone of the State's youth development policy and quest for sustainable positive socioeconomic transformation of lives and communities. This would improve boxing and football and other easy-to-participate-in sports, create more related jobs, groom the raw talents which abound and raise and enhance the science of the sports through increased academic research, and produce sportsmen and women who are more skilful. Such jobs and players would bring wealth and social security, and nourish the national economy, leagues and sports scene. The expertise and skills of players could



be employed in other countries to earn vital foreign currency, financial returns and rewards. In investing in sports, the State should create and expand existing sports facilities at neighbourhood, town, district and regional levels, and establish and/or assist individual entrepreneurs to set up more academies throughout Ghana.

A stronger promotion of amateur sports activities in primary and high/secondary schools, colleges and universities, and renovation and maintenance of old public sports stadia could be positive starting points for an aggressive sports development policy in the country. Talents would be identified, strengthened and made competitive at the local and international level. All African governments should endeavour to do this in their countries to produce more sports icons and legends like Azumah Nelson, with positive characteristics and power. Azumah Nelson is just one person. His life is inspiring. His work is valuable to popular culture in Ghana, Africa and the world in general. What could a hundred, two hundred or more of his kind in Africa do for the continent and the world?

Notes

- 1 Interestingly, passion, etymologically, is connected to the Old French *passion*, which connects to the Latin *passionem* 'suffering, enduring,' – and *pati* – 'to suffer, endure.' – See *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s.v. 'passion'.
- 2 Professionals endeavour to master their fields, and to achieve a goal that supersedes the self. This quest, despite the innate dangers and/or fun, inspires passion. People may pursue painful 'honourable' missions because they seek the ultimate pleasure of accomplishing them. The pleasure and pain/suffering that people find in their professions produce passion for and in those who pursue them. Passion, whether painful or pleasurable, energises the mission of occupational boxing, and provides an enduring emotional reward – victory and fame – that goes beyond physical pleasure or pain.

Appendix: Photographs

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Figure 1 Muhammad Ali with some of his sporting fans at the airport during his visit to Ghana in 1964.

Photograph: Edgar Puplampu.

©Ministry of Information, Ghana.



Figure 2 Muhammad Ali pays a courtesy call on the President of Ghana, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah, at the Flagstaff House in 1964.

Photograph: Edgar Puplampu.

©Ministry of Information, Ghana.



Figure 3 Muhammad Ali speaking to members of the Ghana Young Pioneers movement during his visit to Ghana in 1964.

Photograph: Edgar Puplampu.



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Figure 4 Floyd Klutei Robertson, Commonwealth (British Empire) featherweight champion in the 1960s.

Figure 5 (below) A crowd waiting for the arrival of World Featherweight champion, D.K. Poison, at the national airport in Ghana, in 1975.

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Figure 6 D.K. Poison (in white), WBC Featherweight champion, paying a courtesy call on the Ghanaian Head of State General I.K. Acheampong (2nd from left) after his arrival in Ghana, in 1975.

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Figure 7 Parents and relatives of Azumah Nelson, the newly crowned World Featherweight boxing champion, waiting at the airport in Ghana for his arrival from Puerto Rico in 1984.

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Figure 8 A chat between Azumah Nelson, the newly crowned WBC Featherweight champion, and the Ghanaian Head of State, Ft. Lt Rawlings following his arrival in Ghana from Puerto Rico in 1984.

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Figure 9 Azumah Nelson sitting confidently at the palace of the Bolga Naba in Ghana.
Photograph: Jomo Yeboah Adje



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Figure 10 Ike Quartey (middle), WBA Welterweight champion pays a courtesy call on the Ghanaian President J.J. Rawlings (left) to show him his title belt in 1994. Also in the photo is Justice D.F. Annan (right), a renowned Ghanaian statesman and boxing enthusiast.

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Figure 11 The author, De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway (left), and Azumah Nelson in Accra, Ghana, in 2011.

Photograph: De-Valera N.Y.M. Botchway

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Captions to cover photographs

Front cover: Referee Marty Denkin waves Ghana's Azumah Nelson to a neutral corner after he knocked Mexico's Gabriel Ruelas down in the second round of their WBC super featherweight title bout in Indio, California, 1 December 1995.

Back cover (top): Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson, 26 January 1993.

Back cover (middle): Azumah Nelson celebrates after retaining his WBC super featherweight title against Australia's Jeff Fenech, 28 June 1991.

Back cover (bottom): Azumah Nelson and Jeff Fenech in action during their bout in Las Vegas, Nevada, 28 June 1991.

Boxing is no Cakewalk!

Boxing is no Cakewalk! Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the Social History of Ghanaian Boxing explores the social history of boxing in Ghana and its interesting nexus with the biography of Azumah Nelson, unquestionably Ghana's most celebrated boxer. The book posits that sports constitute more than mere games that people play. They are endowed with enormous political, cultural, economic and social power that can influence people's lives in various ways.

Boxing is no Cakewalk! interrogates the social meaning and impact of boxing within the colonial and postcolonial milieu of popular culture in Ghana. Consequently, it reconsiders the prevailing conception of boxing as adversative to 'enlightened' human culture by arguing that it is a positive formulator of individual and national identities. The historicising of sports and the lives of sportspersons in Ghana provides an eloquent backdrop for an understanding of the past social dynamics and their effect in the present.

The book's analytical narrative offers an intellectual contribution to the promising areas of social and cultural history in Ghana's historiography and the scholarly discourse on identity formation and social empowerment through the popular culture of sports.

Boxing is no Cakewalk! Azumah 'Ring Professor' Nelson in the Social History of Ghanaian Boxing is a rich resource for knowing and understanding the social history not just of boxing in Ghana, but of boxing generally. I commend Professor Botchway for writing it.

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& Senior Lecturer, University of Cape Coast, Ghana**

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